

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

# *cine*ACTION

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**FEMINIST** Film  
Theory  
Criticism





NO. 24 / 25 1991

## *cine***ACTION**

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# Feminist Culture and The New Order

right wing media proclaim the "end" of feminist struggles while sedulously reporting escalating violences against women (by serial killers, husbands and fathers, cancers...). The media fascination with this violence is of course not new; the culmination of this fascination in the notion that the women's liberation movement has come and gone certainly is. The effect silences the staging of feminist political strategies by making the identification of agency virtually impossible.

Not surprising, the latest polls (all taken at the beginning of the 1990s—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Macleans*) indicate that a younger generation of women no longer 'feel the need' to identify themselves as feminists, seeing in the general (read narrowly defined) aims of the women's movement a victory already accomplished. As a recent episode of *Entertainment Tonight* put it: "The F-word is out, the environment is in!". The F-word is definitely not out of the reaches of market forces which have transformed it into a non-word, a negative function put to rest now that the New World Order is in place, democracy has triumphed globally, and women go to war.

Faced with this Order, there is a new urgency to situate feminist culture squarely in the realm of a politics of difference; one that is continually extending and transforming the meanings, sites and histories of feminist praxis. What this means more precisely and how it affects feminism's utopian vision of a unified struggle is addressed by many of the writers in this issue. On the one hand, difference can all too easily play into the soothing liberal pluralism of consumer culture where every need is accounted for. On the other hand, it seeks to intervene in a highly rationalized system of global exchange which homogenizes and contains feminist culture. The precarious dilemma inherent in a politics of identity caught between discourses of authenticity and the 'technologies of self', is the (contradictory) cornerstone of the feminist movement, at once united and fragmented by difference.

It has become fundamentally clear that women's culture—specifically as it intersects with the creation/extension of public spheres and new communities of women—is more than ever central to feminist politics. This issue of *Cineaction* is devoted to films and videos produced by women, to feminist criticism and theory. The articles included here go beyond the ideology critique of early feminist writings; not limited to a particular genre or aesthetic, they cross the boundaries of popular and alternative culture to emphasize female authorship, new forms of historiography and the ethics of feminist criticism. It is precisely by not being tied to the aesthetic parameters of margins and centres dictated by patriarchal capitalism, that feminist cultures have begun to thrive.

Janine Marchessault  
Susan Morrison







## Letter from an editor

July, 1991

From time to time it is necessary to point out that the Cineaction collective is composed of a group of writers united in their endeavours to produce three issues of this magazine annually. Otherwise, we are a disparate group and are represented by a wide variety of opinions/commitments/ ideas. The two editors who supervise the production of each issue are free to solicit and include the articles they choose (aside from those submitted by other members of the collective) and write the editorial to each issue.

As a member of the *Cineaction* collective, I wish to disassociate myself and voice my protest against the editorial which appeared in the last issue (No. 23) on documentary film. The editorial, entitled, "Theory, Politics And ...Watching the Gulf War," serves to both introduce the issue on documentary and offers a diatribe in digest form against the media's reporting of the Gulf War on television. The devastating events in the Gulf during the early months of this year (and the long term effects which we cannot yet gauge) evoked a complex of intense and volatile emotions ranging from frustration and anger to fear.

Understandably, the editorial reflects the immediacy of the situation and an attempt to make these events meaningful. Nevertheless, responsible political analysis should be argued coherently and defended in a detailed context, preferably in a full-length article. The compressed, rambling comments offered, misplaced in an editorial, undermine the charge against the press's oversimplified representation of the Gulf War, as drained of "historical or political fact." What is most disturbing is the manner in which a number of glib, reductive generalizations creep in, equalling the insidious forms of mystification characteristic of the bourgeois media against whom the piece is directed. For example, in an attempt to isolate the media's use of generic conventions borrowed from mainstream realist film, the editors tell us that "melodrama within the war movie" was evident in the scenes where "we went inside Israeli homes to await, gas masks on, the arrival of "terrorist" Scuds, TV's favourite visual image throughout." Aside from the suspect appropriation of generic modes, here, specifically the melodrama, the use of quotation marks

around the word "terrorist" signals the knowing reader that these missiles clearly were not terrorist, and considering them as such must be another example of "the dominant media's adeptness at fabrication and lies." The editors fail to provide a context — crucial facts such as the censorship imposed on visual reports from Iraq or Israel's restraint and unwillingness to retaliate (a sore disappointment to be sure) are conveniently repressed because they might complicate the black/white analysis offered. This goes hand in hand with comments such as "Israel has always been a strategic linchpin of imperialism..." (an echo of Saddam Hussein's *cri de guerre*). The "we all know" style of rhetoric moves a conflict with a complex history of political actuality into the unanswerable realm of myth.

We don't have to resort to peppering editorials with the politically correct dicta of every armchair Marxist. In addition, it is disappointing to see the lack of any mention of the media documentation of Canadian history. Given the editors' commitment to national realities and cultural identity, why neglect to address any national representations of terror and oppression such as last summer's "stand off at Oka." How's that for a Western? I guess it's too close to home. It's much simpler and safer to bravely take our stands on the Middle East/Gulf war.

I am not discouraging political analysis of media representation in the issues of *Cineaction*; I'm against simplistic, reductive shots from the hip in the name of committed practice. This should not make its way into a few paragraph editorial where one is excused from addressing any claims with rigour or responsibility. I, for one, am sorry it did and I remind our readers that we do not speak with one voice.

Florence Jacobowitz



## Kinder, gentler Cineaction?

"Letter from an Editor" lays out with startling clarity an ongoing conflict and contradiction in our journal's policy. Are we a journal of scholarly contemplation for a disparate variety of opinion, with the technical commitment to co-production of any academic journal, or are we a political forum committed to socialism and feminism? Our history, and most issues, combine these aims, perhaps uneasily.

This letter spells out the most academically neutral stance quite fiercely. However, I have never been equivocal about which direction I favour and in my editorial of the last issue, I spoke as a socialist to the Left and the anti-war movement, as a community. I wanted to summarize some of the anger and grim humour that have become "common sense" for the Left post-war, particularly in response to the media's powerful role. Any viewer of CNN could follow those remarks and I assumed our readers' radical inclinations offer some shared sense of historical and political context. Our readers are not political naifs who require the spoon feeding Jacobowitz censoriously demands. Editorials are precisely for political polemic and sharp opinion — even in the daily paper, let alone a leftist journal.

I'm glad to have spiced up *Cineaction's* bland record. Those who disagreed, or don't define themselves on the Left, were, I hope, provoked and incited to question their own post-war responses. More generally, my remarks tried to mediate between theoretical issues and the constant need to deploy those concerns in the political world, to bridge that academic/political rift a little. Every point I made is in a language of political and ideological struggle with a well-known history and a theoretical tradition which, far from "mystifying", always combines the partisan and the analytical. However, the stance of speaking from the Left to the Left is totally foreign to Jacobowitz's vision of a respectable enterprise.

This unique editorial policy is offered in the name of *no politics at all* — just the journalism school rhetoric of analysis, complexity, responsibility, thoughtfulness, etc. — as if these were separate from anger, militance and taking a position on volatile topical events; this is the very ideology the media or academia never live up to. On the one hand, timidity serves the scholarly

vocation: 'Gosh, the world is so complicated, it needs more study; radicals are so strident and emotional. Why, it could take decades to tease out the progressive or reactionary nuances of Stormin' Norman's star persona.' On the other hand, this studious umbrage is disingenuous because there is an ugly politics here. Basically, this is traditional Red-baiting — "dicta from Marxists" — guess who's not part of acceptable "disparate variety"? It's only a bit more noxious coming from within an ostensibly leftist collective. But Red-baiters do try to keep up — I'm also "politically correct". Possible, though unintended, compliment aside, this is the slogan of the reactionary campaign against feminists, gays, racial minorities and Marxists so prominent in the mainstream press and gleefully endorsed by Bush himself. As for armchairs, this hoariest of petty McCarthyisms, hurled from deep in the library stacks, is not quite accurate: I always decree my dicta from a regular desk chair and I did manage to struggle out of it for several months of anti-war activity.

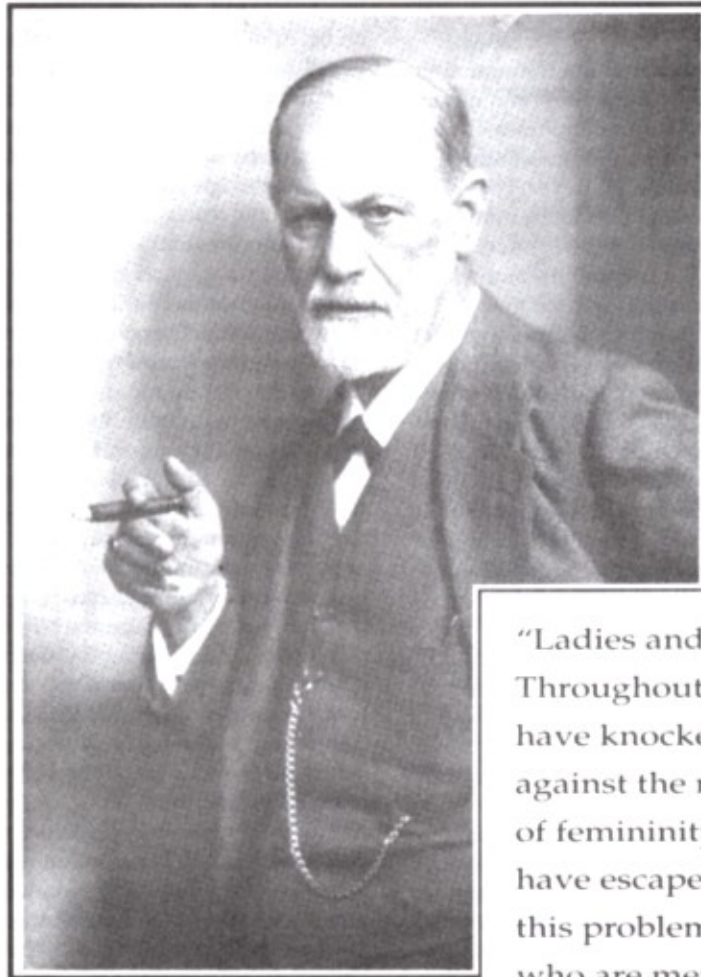
The crux of the editorial is obviously unqualified opposition to the war, and sympathy for the Iraqi and Palestinian victims. Jacobowitz has nothing substantive to say in response. To announce profoundly, months after its conclusion, that the war caused "a complex of emotions" presumably means Jacobowitz either implicitly supported the war or is embarrassed to have no position at all. She shows us that, far from "safe", war is a difficult time to oppose your own nation and its ruling class. It's the archetypal moment for liberals to scurry for cover. You either oppose or support a war; sometimes the world is black and white as well as complex. Just as vaguely, Jacobowitz has no defense of Israel. To say that Israel is not strategic for Western Imperialism is impossible, (she would have to disagree with generations of Israeli and American politicians who've always been quite candid on this), so I am Saddam-baited — laughable, if it were not such a blatant symptom of the media frenzy we're not to comment upon. By a similar logic, Jacobowitz is clearly in league with Kuwaiti feudalism. Finally, the charge that addressing the Gulf War that raged while the last issue of *Cineaction* was being prepared somehow undermines our support for Native peoples at Oka last year is just addled innuendo.

The convergence of tepid liberalism with new-conservative belligerence has been a prominent ideological trend for years; it's a serviceable attitude as the Gulf War declares, in blood, a new world order. It's depressing to see this fashion creep onto these pages — as I said the historical tone is both bullying and complacent.

Scott Forsyth

# The (Female) Subject of Masochism

"FORGIVE ME FATHER FOR I HAVE SINNED..."



"Ladies and Gentlemen... Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity — Nor will you have escaped worrying about this problem — those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply — you are yourselves the problem."<sup>1</sup> SIGMUND FREUD

*by Susan Morrison*





At once addressed (Ladies and Gentlemen) and excluded (this will not apply to you), the women in Freud's imaginary audience would thus appear to have been offered no active role to play in his discourse other than as passive subject(s) for the ensuing lecture on 'Femininity.' However, even a cursory glance at the recent proliferation of writings on just that 'worrysome' problem firmly indicates that Freud's exclusionary tactics have failed to silence the women. On the contrary, the current resurgence of interest in the nature of femininity has occurred precisely because of women's desire to throw light on what Freud termed 'the dark continent.' This feminist *Aufklärung*/Enlightenment may be seen ironically enough as deriving from and responding directly to Freud's admonition, at the end of the same lecture, that, "If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experiences of life..."<sup>2</sup>

One of the distinguishing characteristics of feminist discourse is that it attempts to incorporate women's experiences into its theoretical constructions as a starting point towards a liberation of the female subject.<sup>3</sup> But, as E. Ann Kaplan cautions in 'Is the Gaze Male,' liberation does not necessarily mean the cessation of reflective activity:

Women wanted, rightly, to accept themselves sexually, whatever the turn-on mechanism. But to simply celebrate whatever gives us sexual pleasure seems to me to be both problematic and all too easy: we need to analyse how it is that certain things turn us on, how sexuality has been constructed in patriarchy to produce pleasures in the dominance-submission forms, before we advocate these modes.<sup>4</sup>

This paper began as a self-reflexive attempt to come to terms with and to understand a response of pleasure to a particular text, Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953), a film which foregrounds the erotogenic possibilities of female masochism, a position which, in 'liberated' circles, is not considered to be 'politically correct.'<sup>5</sup> In addition, it was also influenced by Gaylyn Studlar's 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,' one of the more interesting pieces of film theory and analysis in the past few years, a paper which relies on Deleuze (who relies on Reik) to refute some basic principles of Freud's theory of masochism, and consequently, to substitute an 'anti-oedipal' reading of the mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus for the now conventional one proposed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal paper, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." As a result of this double genesis, the following piece has been organized into three sections. The first will deal with the psychoanalytic understanding of masochism, especially as it relates to women, using Freud, mainly. The second part will look at masochism as it has been investigated in recent writings on film. The last section will analyse a specific film, *Pickup on South Street*, in order to uncover its structures of female masochism, both in terms of the female subject in the film itself, and the female subject in the audience.

## ■ ■ ■ MASOCHISM AS A PERVERSION

That masochism has a sexual etiology cannot be denied. Freud's first extended discussion of masochism comes near the beginning of his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' of 1905, where he expounds on the aberrations encountered in human sexual behaviour. He collects those deviations which occur in respect of the sexual aim under the category of *Perversions* (those occurring in respect of the sexual object he calls *Inversions*). While he admits that non-genital sensory experiences (touching, looking) are essential as preliminary stages to the sexual aim, i.e., 'normal' genital gratification in copulation, Freud separates off as 'perverse' those forepleasures that do not result in a genital sexuality. According to Freud, the most common and significant of the perversions is what he refers to as 'foreplay which produces pleasure in unpleasure,' i.e., the desire to inflict pain on the sexual object, and its reverse, the desire to have pain inflicted by the object on the subject. It is of some importance to note that Freud considered this aberration as a single form, having two manifestations, an active (Sadism) and a passive one (Masochism). He cites the alternative use of the term 'Algolagnia' (which would give us 'active' Algolagnia and 'passive Algolagnia'), but admits that its etymological interpretation as 'pleasure in physical pain' is too constricting, for it omits the ancillary experiences of pleasure in *mental* pain, through humiliation and subjugation.<sup>6</sup> In actuality, Freud's definition of Sadism and Masochism cover an extremely broad range of activity and affect, with the result that some ambiguity is present with regards to an understanding of just what is meant by his use of the term perversion, a term which in everyday speech is highly charged with connotations of degradation and deviancy. Freud appears to solve this problem by making a distinction between a 'socially acceptable' perversion (part of 'normal' sexuality), and a 'socially unacceptable' one signifying a pathological symptom:

Masochism is any passive attitude towards sexual life and the sexual object, the extreme instance of which appears to be that in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object.<sup>7</sup>

1. Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity,' S.E. vol. 22 (1933), p.112

2. Freud, p.135

3. See especially *Heresies*, vol. 3 no. 4, issue 12, 1981, an issue which focuses on the non-academic recounting of women's experiences with regards to their sexuality.

4. E.A. Kaplan, 'Is the Gaze Male' in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983), p.317

5. For this position, see Paula Kaplan's *The Myth of Women's Masochism* (1985), a book which seeks to deny the existence of female masochism, seeing it as a fiction that enslaves women by its very presence in analytic discourse. Denying it will not make it go away.

6. Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality,' S.E. vol. 7 (1905), p.157

By Feminine masochism however, Freud did not mean masochism peculiar to women. Rather, the term defined a masculine variation, in which the male chose to play the passive (i.e., feminine) role of his desire to be copulated with/by his father and to have his father's baby.

In other words, Freud seems to be opening up the parameters of perversion to include a non-pejorative side, one which he goes on to claim, is common enough in 'normal' people:

No healthy person, it appears, can fail to make some addition that might be called perverse to the normal sexual aim: and the universality of this finding is in itself enough to show how inappropriate it is to use the word perversion as a term of reproach. In the sphere of sexual life we are brought up against peculiar and indeed insoluble difficulties as soon as we try to draw a sharp line to distinguish mere variation within the range of what is physiological from pathological symptoms.<sup>8</sup>

As long as the subject does not become fixated on the particular preliminary activity, thereby excluding its service as a path towards the final sexual genital aim, Freud releases him/her from the stigma attached to the possessor of a pathological symptom. The main reason for drawing out at such length the distinctions Freud made within the general concept of perversion is that in dealing with female masochism too often the strategy has been to treat it as a monolithic problem. I wish to locate it instead not as a pathological symptom characteristic of 'sick' behaviour (which it indubitably might be in its extreme instance for some), but as a pervasive aspect of female sexuality. My goal will be to try to understand its origins, rather than deny them, as some feminists have done, for it is only by coming to understand their psychical as well as social reality that women can effect real change.

#### ►► FEMALE MASOCHISM

Most writers on the subject suggest that masochism is an inherently female tendency. Often, the social, cultural, and

biological conditions are invoked to underline and emphasize this relationship. Helene Deutsch, for example, refers to masochism as integral to all women's psychical makeup.<sup>9</sup> Theodore Reik cites 'tradition and education' as favouring a 'vague and mild masochism' in women, and outlines a biological proclivity wherein menstruation, defloration, and childbirth promote the development of a masochistic inclination.<sup>10</sup>

Freud's description of masochism at its mildest as 'any passive aim in sexual life' at once brings up the issue of the relationship between passive aims and femininity. Having previously marked off masochism as a passive counterpart to sadism, Freud notes, in 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life' (1933) "You will scarcely have failed to notice that sadism has a more intimate relation with masculinity and masochism with femininity, as though there were a secret kinship present."<sup>11</sup> However, in the following paper, lecture XXXIII, entitled 'Femininity,' Freud offers a more penetrating look at this 'secret kinship.'

One might consider characterising femininity psychologically as giving preference to passive aims. This is not, of course, the same thing as passivity; to achieve a passive aim may call for a large amount of activity. It is perhaps the case that, in a woman, on the basis of her share in the sexual function, a preference for passive behaviour and passive aims is carried into her life to a greater or lesser extent, in proportion to the limits, restricted or far-reaching, within which her sexual life thus serves as a model. But we must beware in this of underestimating the influence of social customs, which similarly force women into passive situations. All this is still far from being cleared up.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly enough, Freud takes pain to distinguish between femininity and the feminine position. The former connotes the sum total of womanhood — for Freud, an ever-perplexing and mysterious riddle, while the latter merely denotes the passive role of behaviour. A person, whether male or female, can thus behave in a masculine fashion or in a feminine one. In 'Three Essays on Sexuality,' he outlined three different kinds of masochism; erotogenic, moral, and feminine. By feminine masochism however, Freud did *not* mean masochism peculiar to women. Rather, the term defined a masculine variation, in which the male chose to play the passive (i.e., feminine) role of his desire to be copulated with/by his father and to have his father's baby.<sup>13</sup>

A review of his writings on the topic of female masochism indicates that Freud hypothesized two causes for the tendency. The later one, expressed in 'Femininity,' derives from his theories laid out in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1922) of the existence of a Destructive or Death Instinct.

The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed, as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards.<sup>14</sup>



While this thesis may not be incompatible with the earlier one, it is essentially the latter which will concern us here, for its genesis in the Oedipal complex has more obvious import for the cinematic theorizing to follow.

In 1919 Freud published an article which deals specifically with the issue of female masochism. "A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" uses material gleaned from four female patients to establish a theory of causality for sadistic and masochistic fantasies among women. While the number of actual cases examined is very small, Freud stresses that in fact, the fantasy under discussion, i.e., that a child is being beaten, is surprisingly frequent among neurotics as well as non-neurotics.<sup>15</sup> Noting a distinction between the male interpretation of the scene and the female ones, Freud restricts himself for the most part to an analysis of the three female versions. In them, he discerns three different stages to the fantasy which follow in chronological fashion. Each stage refers to a change in identification of the role-players, which in turn relates to the kind of satisfaction received from the fantasizing. In the first stage, the 'child' is always an Other; the person doing the beating, an adult, later identified as the father. Freud gives this a strictly sadistic reading in which the patient's father proves his love for her by beating (all) others. 'He loves only me' is the significance of the fantasy, the desire expressed therein. The second stage — phase two — identifies the 'child' as the patient herself, with her father being the agent of punishment. 'I am being beaten by my father' is the expression of unmistakably masochistic wishes. This stage, Freud notes, is unconscious, never remembered, a construct of analysis, but real nevertheless. Phase three returns the 'child' to an external other, as in phase one, but effects a double exchange; the child is now a boy, never a girl, and the father is replaced by a suitable substitute authority figure such as a teacher. Sadistic impulses are thus reverted to, and the strong sexual excitation which accompanies this stage results in masturbatory activities.

## ◀ FANTASY AS PSYCHICAL REALITY

In this article, Freud takes care to insist that 'A Child is Being Beaten' is a fantasy, *not* a recounting of a real-life situation. Not one of the three variations of the subject/object theme, he avows, would have elicited conscious pleasure in the patient if they had, in fact, occurred:

The experience of real scenes of beating at school produced in the child who witnessed them a peculiarly excited feeling which was probably of a mixed character and in which repugnance had a large share. In a few cases the real experience of the scenes of beating was felt to be intolerable. Moreover, it was always a condition of the more sophisticated fantasies of later years that the punishment should do the children no serious injury.<sup>16</sup>

What is of utmost importance to an understanding of the present topic of female masochism as well as central to Freudian psychoanalysis itself is the distinction to be made/being

made here between what we might call 'physical' and 'psychical' realities. That the latter is of no less importance for the individual than the former was the chief determinant in Freud's renouncing of his seduction theory — the child is seduced by the father — in favour of his postulation of the Oedipal situation — the girl child wished to be seduced by her father. In other words, Freud found that the fantasy of a desired seduction proved to be just as real, just as powerful a motive for repression/neuroses for the individual as the physical realisation of the same. However, it is crucial to keep this in mind as we look more closely at female fantasies, for they are often discredited as being unimportant (viz. Harlequin Romances, the 'soaps,' 'Women's films,' etc.). What I would like to emphasize is that if we see the fantasy as being equal in psychical consequences to physical reality, then we can look at masochistic fantasies as representative of women without necessitating actual physical brutality. It is the fantasy that is erotogenic, articulating the desire, not the actual beating.

Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, in an insightful paper on the relationship between fantasy and sexuality, call attention to the prime importance of fantasy, the 'fundamental object of psychoanalysis,' seeing the function of fantasy as the *mise-en-scène* of desire, a '*mise-en-scène* in which what is forbidden is always present in the actual formation of the wish.'<sup>17</sup> The application of Laplanche and Pontalis's notion of fantasy to film, identifying it as a form of public fantasy, has been convincingly accomplished by Elizabeth Cowie in her paper titled 'Fantasia' (1984). The section of their work that this paper will draw upon is their concept of primal fantasies that lie beyond the history of the subject, but are, nevertheless, in history.

Original fantasies are limited in their thematic scope. They relate to problems of origin which present themselves to all human beings (*Menschenkinder*): the origin of the individual (primal scene), the origin of sexuality (seduction), and the origin of the difference between the sexes (castration).<sup>18</sup>

It is with the middle group of fantasies, those concerning the

7. Freud, p.158
8. Freud, pp.160-1
9. Helene Deutsch, 'On Female Homosexuality,' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1932), p.490
10. Theodore Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man* (1941), p.214
11. Sigmund Freud, 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life,' S.E. vol. 22, p.104
12. Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity,' S.E. vol. 22, pp.115-6
13. Sigmund Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' S.E. vol. 19 (1924), p.165
14. Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity,' S.E. vol. 22 (1933), p.116
15. Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten,' S.E. vol.17 (1919), p.179
16. *Ibid.*, p.180
17. Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,' in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 49 (1968), p.10
18. *Ibid.*, p.17

origin and upsurge of sexuality, that we shall shortly concern ourselves.

## ◀ ■ MASOCHISM, FANTASY, AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

It is the second phase of the fantasy 'A Child is Being Beaten,' interpreted as 'I am being beaten by my father' which singles out the most important variation, the key in fact to unlocking the very meaning of the fantasy. In phase one, the implications of the beating thus fantasize: (father beating another child) may be seen as representing the prime pre-Oedipal moment, in which the child expressed her expectation of sole possession of her father's love — My father is beating the child whom I hate, *therefore* he loves only me. This phase is not accompanied by a genital excitation representing as it does a pre-genital mode of sexual organisation. However, the girl's entry into the Oedipal stage of development, when she must recognize the impossibility of her incestuous desire for her father and consequently relinquish her exclusive relationship with him, accounts for the second variation of the fantasy. Her paradoxical investment of both pleasure and pain is witnessed by the revised reading of the text as 'I am being beaten by my father.' Freud sees this as motivated by the repression of those incestuous feelings which have been reformed in the unconscious as a strong sense of guilt. It is this guilt which is being/must be atoned for by the insistence (*her* insistence) on the punishment. At the same time, however, this punishment is inextricably linked up to sexual excitation.

'My father loves me' ... is turned into 'My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).' This being beaten is now a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation, and from this latter source, it derives libidinal excitation which finds its outlet in masturbatory acts. Here for the first time we have the essence of masochism.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, for the girl, punishment and sexual pleasure not only co-exist, but become pre-conditions for each other. Using a theological analogy, we may explain this paradox in terms of paternal Absolution. The girl, suffering unbearable guilt for her (repressed) incestuous desire for the father, seeks to receive absolution from him, an absolution which may be achieved only at her own bodily expense — the (fantasized) sin of the flesh punished by mortifying (in fantasy) that very flesh. However, because the agent of punishment is none other than her father, the object of her desire, this 'special' treatment may be read as well as the fulfilling of the original incestuous wish. The beating becomes a kind of genital stroking, thereby erotogenic in this capacity. It must be stressed that the high degree of sexual excitement associated with the beating does not arrive from the punishment itself (what we might call 'hermetic' masochism); rather, it is in the way that the beating both expiates, erases, and at the same time permits the desired seduction by the father to take place that its importance lies. This fantasy — I am being beaten by

my father — is the setting-in-place of the desire *for* the father, to return to Laplanche and Pontalis's formation. Only by being punished, punishing herself, does the girl permit herself to be sexually active, to express her sexual desires. Only in this way *can* she be released from the total suppression of her sexuality.

Masochism is not pleasure in pain, nor even in punishment, but the masochist's real pleasure is obtained subsequently, in that which is made possible by the punishment. The masochist must undergo punishment before experiencing pleasure.<sup>20</sup>

It is by understanding this precise point that we can come to understand why masochism plays such an important role in women's lives, not as a brutalizing physical reality, or a pathological perversion, but as a pervasive enough fantasy, which allows women to evade the repressive/oppressive constraints imposed on them through the Oedipalisation processes. Fantasies of rape, fantasies of being taken, brutally or otherwise, fantasies of humiliation (being stripped, being ignored) may be more easily approached by feminists if they are seen in the above light; that is, as fantasies whose aims are to free up the repressed sexuality of their possessor/producer. Of course, this is not to condone the necessity for such fantasies; rather, it is to reveal them in order to see, in Kaplan's words, how sexuality has been constructed in patriarchy to produce pleasures in the dominant-submission forms. What is of great concern here is the inexorable linking of passivity with female sexuality *by the female herself*, in a veritable valorisation of the passive position. As demonstrated above, the passive aim of 'being beaten' is a kind of trade-off, an exchange on the part of the desiring female for the accompanying expression of that desire. In a society which has traditionally relegated unmarried women to the extreme positions of virgin/whore, the popular condemnation of overtly sexual i.e., sexually active women, is a social fact.<sup>21</sup> The masochistic structure which we have pointed out 'at work' in certain erotogenic female fantasies may therefore perhaps be seen as well as an internalised (or introjected) version of these social sanctions, a response to expectations of disapproval. Freud himself often reminded his reader/listener not to overlook the importance of the imposition of social restrictions on the development of the individual. In 'The Dissolution of the Oedipal Complex' (1924), he attributed the female's super-ego construction to specifically social motives (i.e., fear of loss of love), in contrast to the male's, which he says derives from castration fears, i.e., psychological motives.

In the female, these changes (i.e. the development of the super-ego) seem to be the result of upbringing and intimidation from the outside which threaten her with loss of love.<sup>22</sup>

To sum up, masochistic fantasies thus may be seen as evasive actions on the part of the desiring female, to express her sexuality against all odds, in that she herself *actively* wills her punishment in order to *passively* achieve sexual pleasure through the other's intervention.





## MASOCHISM IN RECENT FILM THEORY

In 1974, Laura Mulvey published 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,' an article of inestimable importance to feminist film criticism, for it posited the notion of the Hollywood film as a sadistic mechanism in which the female filmic subject was fixed as a fetishized spectacular image for the male spectator to ravish visually, relishing his own thereby enhanced phallic power. In 1984, Gaylyn Studlar published a response to Mulvey, titled 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema' in which she sought to refute the phallocentrism of Mulvey's argument (i.e., Mulvey's placing the Oedipal stage/castration fears at the centre of the debate) by means of a return to a pre-genital mode of visual pleasure. Using Gilles Deleuze's revision of Freud's theory of masochism ('Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty'), Studlar conceives of the cinema as an essentially masochistic structure in which the passive viewer derives polymorphous sensual pleasure from loss of rather than mastery of control — pleasure in submission. The formal structures associated with masochism (fantasy, disavowal, fetishism and suspense) are cited as integral to the cinematic situation as well. From Deleuze, she takes the notion, central to his thesis, that it is not the *father* who is the agent of punishment/object of desire for the masochist, but the *mother*, with whom the child seeks total fusion i.e., death.<sup>23</sup> This mother, whom Deleuze represents as 'an ideal of coldness, solicitude, and death,' is figured on the screen by the female star, who thereby becomes at once desired and identified with by the male spectator. However, Studlar's use of Marlene Dietrich in her von Sternberg films foregrounds the limitations inherent in her argument. Just as with Deleuze, who evinces no interest whatsoever in the female positioned as masochist, so Studlar, too, writes out of history the place of women as subject of/in theory. Studlar remains phallocentrically confined to discussing *male* issues — *male* spectator, *male* identifications, *male* stars' reactions to female stars, in her attempt to recuperate Dietrich's screen image as positive rather than negative. Even though she quotes copiously from feminist writers on a topic of importance to feminist theory i.e., the mother/child relationship, it's only too evident that she (like Freud and Deleuze) still means by that dyad, mother/son rather than mother/daughter. Taking a female as our masochistic subject (rather than object) and positioning the female as spectator, we find that the Freudian concept of masochism as outlined above was much more fruitful for us than Deleuze's coming to terms with just how and just why the masochistic structure worked. For this reason, we return to the Freudian model rather than employ the Studlar/Deleuze version.

An earlier paper by Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and Subjectivity' (1980) also takes issue with the Mulvey argument, but she too, remains strictly concerned with the *male* subject, even though the film she analyses, Liliana Cavani's

*Night Porter*, does have a female masochist at the centre. Silverman does make a statement near the end of her article which could, in effect, serve as one of the guiding lights of this study of female masochism:

I would like to suggest that the writings of the history of the male subject, which has been going on now for two thousand years, but which reached its culmination in Freud, is really a writing-out of the history of the female subject. It constitutes an elaborate denial of passivity and masochism.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Ann Doane, over the past ten or so years, has attempted to write in the history of the female subject in the cinema. One of her concerns has been to find the specific modes of entry available to women as spectators of Hollywood films. In 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address,' Doane focussed on the Woman's films of the 1940s, a group of films made specifically for a female audience, in order to see how they position the female subject as viewer, i.e., what place/space there is for her to inhabit. Commenting on the 'perpetual staging of suffering' on display in these films, she wondered at the relationship between female fantasy and the recurring themes of persecution, illness and death. Doane turns to Freud's 'A Child is Being Beaten,' where she privileges the third phase — in fact, ignores Freud's analysis of the first two — in order to produce a reading which deprives women of their sexuality altogether, de-sexualizes them or rather, their fantasies. In effect, she sees masochistic fantasies as replacing female sexuality rather than as stimulus for it.

Thus, simultaneous with her assumption of the position of spectator, the woman loses not only her sexual identity in the context of the scenario (she has turned into a boy) but her very access to sexuality. Masochistic fantasy *instead* of sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

While this permits Doane to elucidate certain structures evident in certain films, it represents a particularly narrow and biased reading of Freud's analytic. For Freud insists on the

19. Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten,' S.E. vol.1 7 (1919), p.189

20. Theodore Reik, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1968), p.77

21. If we use the Hollywood cinema as our example of popular culture, we can find innumerable instances where the sexual woman is condemned — to death (Mme. Bovary, Rebecca, Psycho, Dressed to Kill); and to abandonment (Ruby Gentry, Written on the Wind, Gone with the Wind).

22. Sigmund Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipal Complex,' S.E. vol. 19 (1924), p.178

23. Gaylyn Studlar, 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, Fall (1984), p.269

24. Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and Subjectivity,' *Framework* 12 (1980), p.8

25. Mary Ann Doane, 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address,' in *Re-Vision* (1984), p.77



*Pickup on South Street*

erotogenic possibilities of masochism for women. Ignoring this aspect, Doane neglects to investigate why so many women want to see films about (women's) illness, persecution, and death, preferring instead to view the whole matter as a repressive patriarchal tactic for disembodiment/de-sexualizing women spectators. I feel that this is too important an issue to write off in such a dogmatic way. If we shift the emphasis from the 'film as ideological production,' a practice which privileges the object, to look at the ways in which the (female) spectator receives/reconstructs the filmic text, thereby privileging the subject, we might throw some light on this problem/issue.



#### PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET

In 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator' (1982), Mary Ann Doane distinguishes two possible positions for the woman in the film audience to take with regards to the film she is watching. The first, termed 'narcissistic,' requires her to identify with the female star who is fixed as spectacular image for the male viewer *à la* Mulvey. The second position Doane terms 'transvestite,' for the female viewer must give up her sex to identify with the male protagonist of the film. It is obvious that both positions are severely limited/limiting for women, for the first position restricts the

woman's place to a (spectacular) body, while the second totally disembodies her, at least in terms of her female self. Women's issues, concerns, interests, may be thereby glossed over to foreground masculine themes. The main thrust of her later paper 'The Women's Film,' as discussed above, was to investigate those films in order to discern whether there was any other position available when the woman in the audience had a female protagonist with whom she could non-narcissistically identify. What she discovered was that there was a curious de-sexualisation involved in such a transaction — when the woman became central to the film, she lost her sexuality, becoming victimized, passive, subjugated, in the exchange. Doane uses *Caught*, *Rebecca* and *Possessed*, among others, as her examples.

What I would like to do at this point is to look at a film that is *not* a woman's film, yet which has an extraordinary attitude towards its overtly sexual female lead, one which permits a positive identification to occur in quite an unusual way.

Sam Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* made in 1952, was very successful when it was released, not only with the American public but internationally too — it won the Bronze Lion at the Venice Film Festival of 1953. Although ostensibly a B movie, it has maintained its reputation as a tough, hard-hitting action film, shot on a low budget as one of Fuller's contract films, with no big box office names (Richard Widmark had not yet become a major star), *Pickup* nevertheless presents itself *visually* (beautifully photographed, with a number of outstanding shots), and *audially* (the tight, humorous script and accompanying score are first-rate) as a superbly crafted Hollywood



film that offers the viewer more than would be expected. Compared to similar films from the period (e.g. *The Phoenix City Story*, Phil Karlson, 1955 and *Dark City*, William Dieterle, 1950), its production values are quite remarkable. Much of the credit for this has to go to the director, Fuller, who conceived the plot and wrote the screenplay as well. This film, as with all of Fuller's films, may be said to be aimed at a male audience — it's certainly not a 'woman's film,' in the conventional sense, for its concerns are male-oriented (honour, power, alienation, pride), its story, sparse, tough and violent.

The film is set in the New York underworld — not the one of glorified gangsters as in contemporary films like Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy — but one of petty crooks and 'two-bit' losers. The male protagonist, Skip McCoy, played by Richard Widmark, is a pickpocket who has been caught, convicted, and jailed three times prior to the film's beginning. The plot unfolds with the threat of life imprisonment for his next conviction hanging over him continuously. His character is one of extreme macho bravado; when confronted by the cops (to Tiger: "Go on, hit me!"), the F.B.I. (to an appeal to his loyalty: "Who cares?"), and in response to Candy's questioning his skill as a pickpocket ("No one catches me!"). Physically, Widmark's tight, smooth skin, small eyes, high forehead, and thin lips which spontaneously erupt in a seemingly smart-ass smile, embody the innate nastiness of an amoral crook, an embodiment that is inevitably reminiscent of his earlier role as a sadistic killer in *Kiss of Death* (1947) — though somewhat toned down. The women too seem to be stereotypes. Candy, Jean Peters, presumably an ex-prostitute ("Are you going to throw that in my face again?"), is singled out from other women in the film by her appearance — cheap costume jewellery, tight dresses, low-cut necklines, and over-done lipstick — effects which serve to foreground her sexuality, centring her out as an object-to-be-looked-at. She is subjected to practically every kind of brutal treatment possible for a woman in a film, save rape. She is punched out, slapped around, kicked, shoved, and finally shot in the back by the film's end. The other major female character is a tired out old stool pigeon named Mo, Thelma Ritter, actually quite a maternal figure to both Skip ("I knew you since you was a little boy") and Candy. Her refusal to sell Skip's address to the 'commies' results in her being shot to death. The entire action of the film takes place within a twenty-four hour period, except for the last scene in the police station which occurs some time later — all of Candy's bruises have healed! Within that compressed amount of time, Skip inadvertently steals some microfilm about to be delivered to some communist agents, becomes the focus of a search by the police, the F.B.I., and the communists, falls in love with the 'muffin' he 'grifted' (he never actually calls Candy by name), and avenges Mo's murder and Candy's savage beating/shooting by catching Joey, Richard Kiley, the perpetrator of both deeds.

One of the film's themes is loyalty to America in the light of the communist threat to freedom, a concern which has resulted in Fuller's film being branded by some writers as anti-communist propaganda. A close reading of the film proves indisputably that *Pickup on South Street* runs counter to the spate of anti-communist films which were so prevalent in the early 1950s. Skip, who has possession of classified infor-

mation desired by the communists, never places his national interest over his own self-interest, he never admits his mistake in wanting to deal with the commies. In fact, the only way in which he is deflected from his intention to sell the microfilm to them is by being restrained physically (he's knocked out by a blow from a bottle) and the microfilm taken from him while he's unconscious. A jingoistic film would never have allowed the film to end without some admission on the 'hero's' part that his country should come first.

Just as this example of critical misunderstanding confronts the commonly held supposition about Fuller's political intention, so the entire film can be turned around in order to present a face that speaks to women rather than against them through objectification and degradation in the Mulveyian sense. My quest therefore will be to read this film from a female point-of-view, that is, through the female character, my purpose being to discover the source of the pleasures offered women spectators by *Pickup on South Street*. What enables, in fact motivates such an inverted reading is the realization that Candy is not a conventional 'bimbo,' not even in the recuperable sense of, say, Debbie Marsh/Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat* (1953). The fact that she's 'been around' does not doom her to disfigurement and death. Only Joey, the film's supreme coward, uses her past to manipulate her into doing his dirty work. Candy is not branded by the film's moral trajectory as in countless Hollywood productions, a factor due perhaps to the peculiarity of this film in that it does not seem to profess traditional Hollywood morality. The police and F.B.I. are portrayed as being almost as ruthless as the communists, especially in their willingness to use a woman as bait. Candy is given some great lines to deliver, lines which confront the male protagonist (and male viewer) by foregrounding conventional male filmic treatment of women. In response to Skip's watching her while she readjusts herself after being knocked out, she says, "Take your time looking." Another example occurs some time later. Skip has taken her head in his hands, rubbing her sore jaw in a very tender fashion, and proceeds to kiss her, at which point she exclaims, "Does beer always do this to you?". These wisecrack comments are not just notes of humour in an otherwise glum film. They also serve to distance her (and the viewer) from the specific filmic moment (voyeuristic, romantic), providing a kind of re-assessment of the situation, conveying upon her a sense of integrity and strength contradictory to the presented 'image' of cheap trash. While Skip refuses to do anything other than 'play it smart,' it is Candy who, in effect, obtains the microfilm for the cops, acts as a decoy for the communist agents, tries to prevent Joey from discovering Skip's address — he wants to kill him and clears Skip in the end by refusing to press charges (of pickpocketing) against him. While Skip is the purported protagonist of the film, Candy can hardly be said to play a secondary role.

There is no denying the masochistic nature of the 'love' relationship in *Pickup on South Street*. Candy's involvement with Skip consists chiefly of his alternating an extremely brutal approach with an exceptionally tender one — a combination which proves to be particularly seductive, both diegetically to Candy, who falls so in love with him that she willingly risks her life to save his, and extra-diegetically, to the



woman in the audience who is as likely to be turned on by this behaviour as turned off. There are three occasions within the filmic text where this oscillation occurs, each one located inside or just outside of Skip's shack, and having a remarkably similar pattern.

■ — Skip returns home in the evening after being pulled into the police station for questioning by Tiger and Zara. Seeing a flashlight moving within his shack, he enters stealthily and manages to knock out the intruder with a well-placed slug to the jaw. Turning on the light, he sees that it was Candy whom he hit. He takes her purse, searches it, removing all her money and Mo's tie, as well. Leaving her lying on the floor, he gets himself a beer, then goes back over to her and kicks her feet in order to try to awaken her. When this fails, he pours his beer on her face. Candy gets up, at which point he throws her purse at her, telling her to wipe off her face. Skip seems concerned when she rubs her jaw, and takes it in his hands, gently rubbing it with one hand in a tender caress. At the same time, the camera pulls into a tight close-up with soft lights on their faces, the rest of the room, darkened. Music accompanies this moment, a sweet melancholic tune that becomes the leitmotif of their love. Skip asks her questions about the content of the wallet, all the while continuing to caress her jaw and kiss her. Needless to say, all of this is played in a very romantic manner. However, the mood is abruptly broken when Skip indicates that he doesn't believe her story (he asks how much her 'brother' is worth), literally throwing her away from him. He tosses her purse at her, pushes her out the door, and watches, grinning, as she stumbles along the plank to shore.

2. — Candy returns to Skip's shack with Joey's \$500, determined to buy back the microfilm. Skip calls to her, telling her that he is in the back of the house, down the stairs and outside. She sits down with him to chat — they're set against a backdrop of New York harbour at night — questioning him about his profession as pickpocket. He offers her a cigarette, which he proceeds to shove between her lips (a nice macho counterpoint to the famous Bette Davis/Paul Henreid cigarette-sharing trope from *Now Voyager*). Again, as they converse, a romantic atmosphere is established through the use of soft focus lighting, intimate close-up shots, and the repeated playing of the leitmotif. He puts out his hand for money, but she takes it to caress, commenting on how artistic it is. But Candy makes the mistake of asking Skip how he got to be a pickpocket, an intrusion which causes him to react violently by throwing her off him (again) and rebutting with "How did you get to be what you are?". She implores him to forgive her, and, embracing him, kisses him. The theme song returns in the background, and they kiss once more. Candy makes it obvious that she's fallen in love with him for she tells Skip that she's kissed a lot of guys, but it never felt like that before. Skip, however, once more returns to the topic of money, asking her how much she brought for the microfilm. Her response of \$500 causes him to react angrily, pushing her away. He takes her money from the purse, and throws it back at her, telling her that he doesn't believe her story (I'll do business with a Red but I don't have to believe one!).

Confronted with this name-calling, Candy slaps him, but then apologises. Furiously, he pushes her up the stairs to his shack, and hurls her empty purse after her.

3. — After seeing that Mo received a proper burial, Skip returns home to find Candy asleep in his hammock. He gives her a shove to awaken her, but the ensuing discussion reflects a certain tenderness; that is, until Candy admits to Skip that she told Joey where Mo lived. Skip characteristically erupts in anger, but shortly after calms down, apologises, and kisses Candy. There is a repetition of the tight close-up, and the theme song plays in the background. Skip kisses her on the nose, and then indicates that he is off to collect the \$25,000 from Joey. In an ironic reversal of roles, Candy hits Skip over the head with a bottle, knocking him out, rifles through his pockets to find the microfilm, and leaves.

When we take into consideration the fact that *Pickup on South Street* has a happy ending, with Candy 'as good as new,' Skip rehabilitated (supposedly), and the two united as a couple, we can hardly escape from the conclusion that Candy desires a masochistic relationship. While an analysis of her motivations might be interesting, our purpose here is to attend to the film, as 'fantasy' not 'reality'; thus we are more concerned with the effect it has on the female spectator. If we return once more to Laplanche and Pontalis's three primal fantasies, it becomes clear that the Mulvey model is premised on the third one — that of castration — appropriate enough for a male audience/male fantasy; while it is the middle one, that of seduction, that has more bearing and significance for a female audience/female fantasy. In *Pickup on South Street*, Candy's seduction by Skip is continuously played out alongside his punishment of her. If we keep in mind the analysis of 'A Child is Being Beaten' outlined previously which was concerned with the erotogenic role of fantasized seduction/punishment, we can see the film putting into play the erotic fantasy common to many women — the desire for seduction and concomitant punishment by the father. It is for this reason that the film has a value for feminist theorizing, for it enables us to reflect on the intricate relationship for women between fantasy, desire and sexuality.

It is precisely this erotogenic effect which separates *Pickup on South Street* from so many other Hollywood films that involve female masochists. A review of several more prominent examples indicates that there is a 'special effect' in play here that is not present in other films. In Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1946), Joan Bennett and Dan Duryea portray two lovers engaged in a relationship that, for the woman, is essentially masochistic. As with Richard Widmark in *Pickup*, Duryea alternates tenderness and brutality in his treatment of Bennett. However, there is an essential and critical difference in the film's attitude and hence the viewer's attitude towards them, for they are presented as nasty and vicious characters. The result is that the audience is totally unsympathetic towards them — and totally empathetic with the person they are victimizing, played by Edward G. Robinson. Thus Bennett's murder by Robinson (with an icepick) is presented as completely justified and, in fact, well deserved. Both of the





Jean Peters and Thelma Ritter in *Pickup on South Street*

women in the film, Robinson's nagging shrewish wife and the scheming seductress played by Bennett, are so negatively depicted that a female spectator can not possibly identify with either of them, and hence must position herself, in Doane's words, in the 'transvestite' mode of entry, identifying with the pathetic Robinson figure. A second film that offers a female in a masochistic relationship is Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953). Debbie Marsh/Gloria Grahame remains with her sadistic boyfriend because she gains material benefits — all the shopping she could want, and a mink coat, too. However, after a particularly violent attack in which he throws boiling coffee in her face, she turns against him, helping Bannion/Glenn Ford to 'put him away.' While Debbie is, or at least becomes, a figure of sympathy for the audience, and thus permits a positive identification to occur for the woman viewer, the difference between this film and *Pickup* is that the actual scenes of punishment are not moderated by an accompanying seduction, the male agent of punishment is in no way positively portrayed. The film does not therefore produce an erotogenic effect in its masochistic structure.

#### ADDITIONAL NOTES ON PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET

The main concern of this paper has been to expose and explain masochistic structures inherent in female fantasy, using a specific film text as an example. But *Pickup* also lends itself so well to a psychoanalytic reading that I can't close

without some reference to the explicitly sexual coding expressed in it. Candy — her very name suggests sweet sexual delights — is repeatedly having her purse picked by Skip. In the opening scene on the subway train, she is unaware of the violation taking place under her nose, for Skip, hiding behind an open newspaper, delicately unclasps her shoulderbag with his fingers, searching through to remove the wallet. Each time thereafter that they meet, Skip takes her purse from her and empties it of money, on one occasion, hurling it at her because it didn't contain enough to satisfy him. We hardly need to refer to Freud's association of a small purse with the female genitals in 'A Case of Hysteria' of 1905 in order to grasp the sexual connotations of Skip's activities. Candy's question to Skip — "How many times have you been caught with your hands where they don't belong?" conveys a similar double message. Candy's coming into her own, her final control of the situation, is signified in the very last shot by the fact that her shoulderbag — so easily accessible — has been replaced by a clutchbag which she holds on to firmly. The conventional substitute for the male genitals — a gun — is employed in *Pickup* to emphasize the difference in potency between the protagonist Skip and the main antagonist Joey. While Skip prides himself on the fact that he never carries a gun — presumably because his own gun/phallus is potent enough — the cowardly Joey resorts to one by the end of the film, shooting Mo in the face, and Candy in the back. The 'subway train' scene at the end, in a beautiful replay/reversal of the opening one, has Skip picking Joey's pocket in order to steal his gun, thereby rendering him impotent, as the ensuing fistfight reinforces.



by Sarah Evans

# Madonna

# Wannabe

Madonna  
is my real  
name.

Madonna, *The Face* 1985



Her greatest role is the  
one she was born to play:  
Madonna.

Robert Hoffer, *Life* 1986

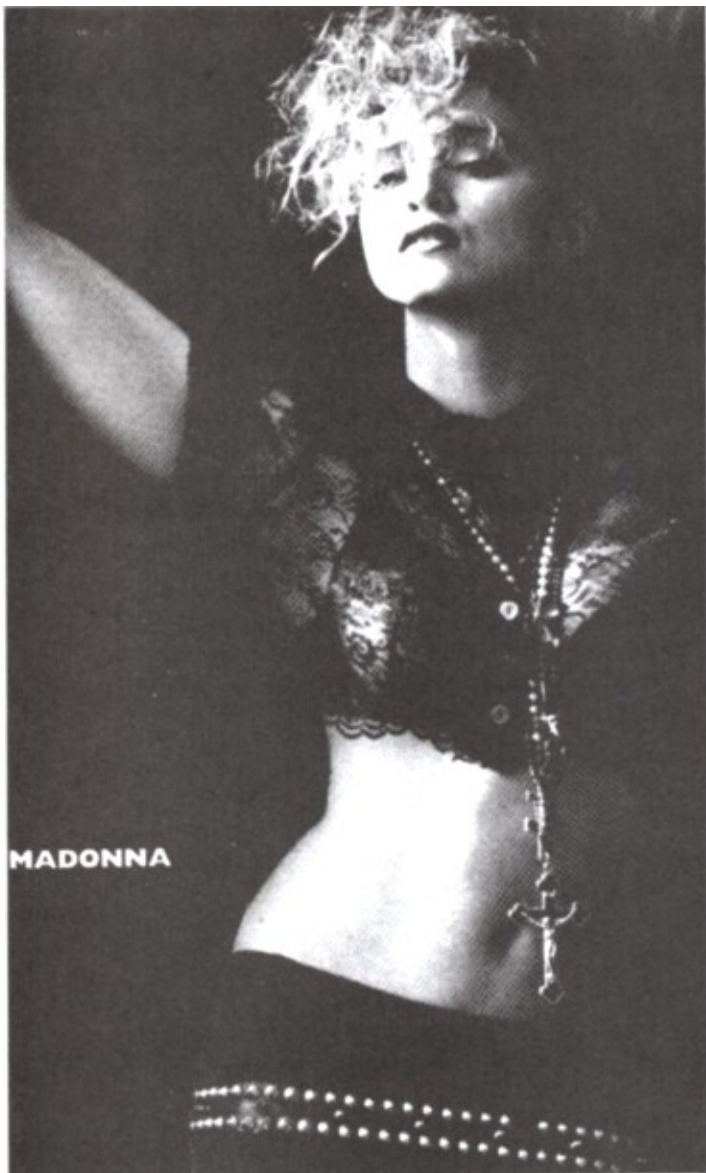
In an early sequence of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Rosanna Arquette's dejected New Jersey housewife sits in the dark of her kitchen picking through the remains of her birthday cake, watching Hitchcock's *Rebecca* on TV. Setting out to rewrite *Rebecca*, to turn that calamitous bad identification with a mysterious woman into a good one, Susan Seidelman cast a then-unknown singer named Madonna as the enigmatic object of the housewife's obsession. Reviewing the movie career of Madonna, most critics assert that her first role as Susan is her

best, and they attribute its fluke success to the fact that Madonna was "playing herself."

By playing herself the critics mean that, like her character Susan, Madonna is a street creature, equal parts attitude and trashy outfits. What the critics really see in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is not a street kid playing a street kid, but a woman identified with playing a woman to be identified with. And this process of identification begins with the singer's own image. When Madonna states that Madonna is her "real name" she is asserting a self-identification, an authenticity as against an identity manufactured by imagemakers. But the name Madonna belongs to someone else as well, to a significant woman (*the* woman) in an important western religion, as well as to the widely disseminated images of that woman. The modern Madonna may be herself, but she is also an icon. She identifies with women who have gone before her, and encourages everywoman to identify with her.







MADONNA

When [Nancy Sinatra] said "Are you ready, boots, start walkin'." it was like, yeah, give me some of those go-go boots. I want to walk on a few people.

Madonna, *Time* 1985



Twelve-year-old girls, headphones blocking out the voices of reason, are running around wearing T shirts labeled VIRGIN, which would not have been necessary 30 years ago.

John Skow, *Time* 1985

As Susan, Madonna is literally a symbol; she is laden with crucifixes, six-pointed stars, skulls and eye-topped pyramids. Unlike Joan Fontaine's new bride paralyzed by her inability to emulate the dead Rebecca, Rosanna Arquette's New Jersey housewife takes on a fluid, dynamic identity when, under the spell of amnesia, she assumes Susan's. She is Susan to her lover, Divina Queen of the Night to her audience, the Stranger to readers of the personals, and a lesbian prostitute and diarist to her astonished abandoned husband. As Susan-hung-with-symbols Madonna has the occult power to transform. Her funky jacket ("it used to belong to Jimi Hendrix") is the talisman which enables the housewife to first borrow and then develop new sartorial, sexual, professional and discursive identities, in much the same way that a pair of go-go boots once gave a little girl grownup ambitions to power. When travelling *incognito*, Madonna registers at hotels under the name of silent screen actress Dita Parlo, or Kit Moresby of *The Sheltering Sky*, or Louise Brooks' Lulu.<sup>1</sup> She appears to her fans as "baby Dietrich,"<sup>2</sup> a "punk Mae West,"<sup>3</sup> and Marilyn.

she is like a virgin. And the teenage wannabes who spent the summer of '85 wearing VIRGIN T shirts were taking a word that traditionally signifies non-identity and non-initiation, and turning it into the token of identity through identification with the star herself and with the mini-society of the lookalikes.

1. Reported in Carrie Fisher, "True Confessions, Part I," *Rolling Stone*, June 13, 1991, p.36.

2. Glamour photographer Francesco Scavullo's pet name for Madonna.

3. Sarah Pillsbury, co-producer of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, quoted in Lynn Phillips, "Who's That Girl?" *American Film* July-August 1987, p.22.





Irony is my favorite thing.  
Everything I do is meant  
to have several meanings,  
to be ambiguous.

Madonna, *Cosmopolitan* 1990

Double or nothing she  
lets you have your cake  
and diet too.

Lynn Phillips, *American Film* 1987

**M**adonna's claims to ironic ambiguity usually meet with some suspicion, perhaps because most of her ironies are curiously retroactive. The songs *Like a Virgin* and *Material Girl* were declared "tongue in cheek" only after they had been ritually mouthed by thousands of kids - with the result that thousands of adults amused by Madonna's spoofs of female stereotypes took up songs already abandoned by fickle teens ready for the next round of *risqué* lyrics.

But Madonna has indeed developed a kind of systematic (not necessarily ironic) ambiguity or doubleness through her videos. While the average rock video features a double diegesis typically combining footage of the band's performance with footage of a loosely drawn narrative illustrating the song, Madonna's clips for *Borderline*, *Material Girl*, *Open Your Heart*, and *La Isla Bonita* develop a significant variation on this traditional performance/story combination. Instead of appearing as Madonna-the-singer and hiring actors to mime some tale of unrequited love, Madonna plays a character who occupies two story spaces, performing in one and looking for love in the other. In *Material Girl* she is a movie-star who demands riches on-screen, but off-screen settles for true, poor love. In *Open Your Heart* she is a stripper who flees the stage to frolic chastely with a little boy. And in *La Isla Bonita* she plays both a wallflower shut up in a shrine, and her alterego, a woman who masturbates and then struts out of the shrine and into the streets in a red, ruffled flamenco gown.

The significance of these split roles is set forth quite clearly in the earliest of these videos, *Borderline*. Here, Madonna plays a character who inhabits two worlds strongly marked by the alternation between colour and b/w stock. Madonna is first depicted as a street kid hanging out with break dancers in a colourful Hispanic neighbourhood. She is discovered by a photographer who introduces her to the b/w world of a high fashion photo shoot, an artificial space marked as the space of performance by the fact that here is Madonna seen to lip-synch the song *Borderline*. When the photographer encourages the neophyte model to vandalize the fake walls and statues of the set with spraypaint graffiti, the street kid forgets where she is and accidentally sprays the photographer's sportscar. The b/w photo shoot suddenly flashes into full

colour, and Madonna hightails it back to the barrio. While the return to the barrio suggests that the street kid couldn't make it as a model because her colourful personal life intruded into the realm of performance, the video actually ends with a full colour closeup of Madonna back on the photo shoot set, lip-synching the last words of the song. Thus, rather than valorizing one position over another - homegirl over model, celebrity over obscurity - *Borderline* opts for a compromise, suggesting that the street kid has found stardom as a street kid. And she has done this by becoming Madonna, a star who here suggests that she hasn't forgotten her roots, and that those roots have gotten her where she is today.

By replacing the standard rock video combination of story and performance space with crosscutting between two story spaces, Madonna presents herself not as a performer, but as a character to be identified with. Thanks to the "magic" of rock video, the characters Madonna plays have the ability to literally be in two places at once, that is, to simultaneously occupy two contradictory positions. Madonna can be a stripper and a mother, a golddigger and a lover, a virgin and a whore, a street kid and a star, and she offers this same fantastic versatility to the women who identify themselves with her.



[In *Express Yourself*] there  
wasn't a man that put  
that chain on me. I did it  
myself. I was chained to  
my desires.

Madonna, *Nightline* 1990

There's no mistaking  
[*Justify My Love*] for porn  
because it carries such a  
firm point of view.

Jim Farber, *Entertainment Weekly* 1990

**I**f Madonna were a film actress she wouldn't be Madonna. It is only in the world of rock video, where the performer takes precedence over the typically anonymous director, that Madonna could emerge as the author of her own destiny. Having paid for the *Express Yourself* video with her own money, Madonna could justifiably claim that she had chained herself to that bed, for even if the prop man physically put her there, it was Madonna who bought the collar. When her latest video, *Justify My Love*, was banned by the American video network, it was Madonna, not director Jean-Baptiste Mondino, who was asked to explain herself.

Appearing on ABC's *Nightline* with her collar buttoned high, hair pinned back and pen in hand, Madonna acted as if she were taking a meeting with Forrest Sawyer, defending

her artistic freedom in a very business-like manner. While Sawyer led his guest through the standard American media debate on artistic freedom vs. responsibility, Madonna delivered an unusually earnest defence of the *Justify My Love* video. The ambiguous stance of the mid-eighties' *Material Girl* gave way to a declaration of artistic integrity as Madonna explained her efforts to deal honestly with sexual fantasies in an era of growing conservatism and censorship, and cited her inclusion of information on AIDS and birth control in her records and concerts as evidence of her responsible attitude towards her young audience.

Madonna also claimed that MTV routinely challenges her on specific shots or sequences in her videos. In the recent past the station's censors objected to the chains in *Express Yourself*, the sewn-up lips of the corpse in *Oh, Father*, and the see-through blouse in *Vogue*, but allowed the tapes to be played when Madonna refused to make changes.<sup>4</sup> This time, Madonna claimed, the network failed to cite a single offending image and instead condemned the video for its overall tone. And while wire services were quick to provide lists of objectionable elements (AP's "voyeurism, bisexuality, cross-dressing and mild sadomasochism" or Reuter's "lesbian sex replete with black leather and semi-nudity"), and alternative papers such as Toronto's *NOW Magazine*<sup>5</sup> and New York's *Village Voice*<sup>6</sup> claimed homophobia as the motivation for the ban, I would argue that it was, in fact, the overall tone which scared the network censors. For *Justify My Love* sends a message which is just as shockingly explicit and coherent as the one which the newly serious Madonna broadcast on *Nightline*.

Unlike most rock videos *Justify My Love* gives the impression that it was shot to be seen, rather than merely glimpsed. At a total of fifty-five shots it goes past at one-fifth the speed of Madonna's *Express Yourself*, trading the standard video "montage aesthetic" for a style based in moving camera work. And while in *Express Yourself* Madonna is seen in seven different costumes on seven different sets, in *Justify My Love* she wears a single multi-layered ensemble and moves through the two contiguous spaces of a hotel corridor and room.

While it eschews the standard elements of video incoherence, *Justify My Love* does develop its own kind of illegibility through its use of grainy b/w stock, its canted angles and its frequent, seemingly haphazard shifts of focus. Traditionally, rock video illegibility created through editing patterns and

Rosanna Arquette and Madonna in  
*Desperately Seeking Susan*



the use of multiple sets and costumes serves to code the video as fantasy, as a series of implausible actions occurring in impossible spaces. The illegibility of *Justify My Love* points instead to the chimerical nature of the sexual fantasies actually represented in the video, in much the same way that the fetish gear habitually worn by rock stars and video extras here reverts to the bedroom, where it originated, and once again is seen to serve its primary, sexual purpose. Thus, on one level, the illegibility of *Justify My Love* self-consciously highlights the conventions of rock videos incoherence, thereby making the hollowiness of their purely formal fantasies and

4. Reported in Glenn O'Brien, "M," *Interview* June 1990, p.124

5. See Kate Lazier, "Gays Charging Homophobia In Banning Of Madonna Video," *NOW* December 6-12, 1990, p.13.

6. See Richard Goldstein, "Free MTV?" *The Village Voice* December 18, 1990, p.52



their unsatisfying sartorial suggestions of a deferred sexuality perfectly explicit.

On another level, the formal illegibility of *Justify My Love* promotes a different kind of visibility through its evocation of the home-video. Like the home-video, Madonna's seemingly sloppy record of her sexual hijinks becomes an endlessly fascinating document of special, personal events which, because of its lack of detailed narrative, encourages intense scrutiny of the individual images during repeat screenings. By casting her "real-life boyfriend," Tony Ward, as her fellow sexual tourist frolicking in a Parisian hotel, Madonna guaranteed this home-video effect. Its success is eloquently demonstrated by a tabloid headline attributed to Ward which reads: "I'm Madonna's Kinky Sex Slave: She Tortures Me For Kicks!"<sup>7</sup> While the mainstream press has noted Ward's resemblance to Sean Penn, and the tabloid "expert" claimed that Madonna is getting revenge on her abusive ex-husband by "torturing" her current partner, Ward is more nearly the archetypal Madonna fan than a Sean Penn substitute. Writing in *Outweek*, Michael Musto has reported that Ward often dressed up as Madonna and confessed to entertaining sexual fantasies about the star prior to his involvement with her. Commenting on the couple's shared interests, Musto writes that Ward has "always been obsessed with Madonna just like [Madonna has] always been obsessed with Madonna."<sup>8</sup> Thus *Justify My Love* plays like the record of a dream vacation in which Madonna takes her number one fan to Paris, and gives him something to write home about.

Madonna is the unusually still centre of the sexual universe of *Justify My Love*. Having arrived exhausted at a hotel, she collapses into the arms of her lover and embarks on an invigorating sex session in which she fulfills her various fantasies with Ward and several other players. While Madonna only takes two partners, Ward and a woman, Ward cavorts separately with three women, and collectively with two men in drag, dressing at different times in street clothes, bondage gear, and the remains of a drag costume. And although Ward and the other players bend their genders through costume and frequent partner changes, Madonna remains Madonna. Whereas the singer's earlier videos posited a dual-identity constructed through identification with a star like Marilyn or with the good girl and bad girl positions, and realized through multiple costumes, set changes and aggressive editing strategies, *Justify My Love* uses a single, complex costume, and a single continuous space surveyed by a moving camera in order to finally actualize Madonna's self-identification. The star has the ability to transform those around her through her fantasies, and to make Ward's dreams come true. She gives the players dynamic identities, without, however, affecting her own. Here at last is the single Madonna, the one-and-only Madonna.

The sole suggestion of duality in *Justify My Love* arises from Madonna's mimed laughter and the mock-embarrass-

ment of her "you caught me looking" giggle, and the exultant "I got away with it" laugh she indulges in as she makes her escape from the hotel. This laughter functions both as part of the fantasy proper and at the level of its staging; it is delivered to her cohorts in the video and to the audience watching. It is the laughter of the true ironist, the laughter of self-consciousness rather than ambiguity or doubleness. As such it ends by emphasizing the unusual coherence and consistency of the position which Madonna knowingly occupies in *Justify My Love*.

If MTV couldn't cite a single offending shot or sequence in the video it is not because the entire clip is offensive, "wholly concerned with sex," or "pornographic." As Susan Sontag argued twenty years ago in "The Pornographic Imagination", pornography, in order to achieve its intended effect of arousing its user, must allow for identification with a sexual position only nominally occupied by a two dimensional character in the text.<sup>9</sup> Like the work of Genet, which Sontag argues is not pornographic, *Justify My Love* provides instead a fully-developed account of the "author's" own sexual arousal and escapades. Rewriting the usual scenario in which a woman enacts a man's fantasy or is made to confess her own secret wishes only in order to arouse her male partner, Madonna translates the discourse of female sexual fantasy into a coherent and productive demand for sexual action. What set the censors off at MTV was not the threat of adolescent arousal through the medium of Madonna's video image, but Madonna's explicit declaration of her own sexual arousal, and of her self-conscious investment and pleasure in her own super-sexual image.



BILL ZEHME: Do you ever feel black?

MADONNA: Oh, yes, all the time. That's a silly thing to say though, isn't it? When I was a little girl, I wished I was black. All my girlfriends were black. I was living in Pontiac, Michigan, and I was definitely the minority in the neighbourhood. White people were scarce there. All of my friends were black, and all of the music I listened to was black. I was incredibly jealous of all my black girlfriends because they could have braids in their hair that stuck up everywhere. So I would go through this incredible ordeal of putting wire in my hair and braiding it so that I could make my hair stick up. I used to make cornrows and everything. But if being black is synonymous with having soul, then yes, I feel that I am.

*Rolling Stone* 1989

7. *News Extra* January 22, 1991.

8. Michael Musto, "The Immaculate Connection," *Outweek* March 20, 1991, p.40.

9. Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1983), p.219.



**M**adonna's "blackness" is a common, though poorly articulated, theme of popular press literature. It is a theme which dates back to the time before Madonna released a video, when her first two singles did well on the American dance charts and everybody just assumed she was black. Throughout her career Madonna has traded on ethnicities other than her own (Italian American), using the magic of "Jimi Hendrix's jacket" to cast a spell in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and casting herself as the Hispanic-girl-who-makes-good in the *Borderline* and *La Isla Bonita* videos. The progression outlined in the Rolling Stone interview, which takes Madonna from the phase of the wannabe emulating black hairdos to that of the participant in the black essence "soul," was fulfilled in the 1989 video *Like A Prayer*. Condemned at the time of its release by religious groups appalled at the sight of Madonna dancing before a row of burning crosses, *Like A Prayer* is actually a treatise on racism articulated around a complex line of identifications uniting a murdered woman, Madonna, Jesus, suffering saints, and a falsely accused black youth through images of their shared wounds, crosses, cells, tightly curled black hair, and, of course, (the immortal) soul.

While the banned video for *Justify My Love* marks Madonna's break with stars such as Marilyn, and with multiple, stereotypical female positions, it also signals a new phase in Madonna's relationship to "blackness," a relationship which is becoming increasingly complex and exploitative. The song itself evidences a continuing identification with an emulation of "blackness." Written by black retro-rocker Lenny Kravitz, *Justify My Love* also features "additional vocals" by him, and boasts a talking Madonna who approximates the tough tones of black rappers raised on the streets by playing up her lower-middle-class Michigan accent. The song's rhythm track was lifted from Public Enemy's *Security of the First World*, and because Madonna claims she knew nothing about the origin of the track supplied by her producer, this sample sounds more like a blatant (or merely stupid) white appropriation of a black musical strategy than it does an homage to Public Enemy.

Given her rejection of past female role-models in the video for *Justify My Love*, it is not surprising that Madonna's recorded emulation of "blackness" does not translate onto video. On screen Madonna refuses the role she assumed in *Like A Prayer*, and here assigns the task of embodying "blackness" to someone else. Of all the characters in *Justify My Love* only one is black, and his racial difference is echoed by several other differences. While the other players indulge in crossdressing and various forms of foreplay, this single black male is clad in a genderless black dancer's unitard, and boogies through the frame with the sole purpose of drawing our attention to the other entangled bodies. It is this androgynous black figure who opens the door to Madonna's hotel room, literally giving her access to the realm of sexual fantasy without himself participating in the fun and games.

Rather than being a character, this unarticulated and inarticulate figure stands as an abstract idea, or an essence. He is the physical match for Lenny Kravitz's "uh-uh" backing vocals on the record, vocals which stand in sharp contrast to those of Madonna's first sexual directives song *Hanky Panky*, in which a female chorus repeats the lead singer's words in

accordance with the established standard for identification with Madonna through emulation. In *Like A Prayer* Madonna embodied and redeemed blackness by identifying herself with Jesus, with the saviour-who-identifies-with-those-(s)he-saves. In *Justify My Love* the singer buys and borrows "soul" on record, and represents it on video through an asexual, isolated figure who enables Madonna to construct her integral, unique identity at the cost of his own.



## Dr. King, Malcolm X, Freedom of Speech is as good as sex

Madonna, "Rock the Vote" 1990

Sex makes it possible to  
imagine a world where the  
suspension of power is hot.  
In [*Justify My Love*], gender  
is as mutable as costume  
will allow, and no one's  
permanently on top.

Richard Goldstein, *The Village Voice* 1990

**T**hrough *Justify My Love* Madonna has constructed for herself an integral sexual and professional identity and an articulate sexual politics, but at whose expense and to whose advantage? As Madonna becomes more and more successful, it gets harder for the average teen wannabe to emulate this star who has given up vintage rags for designer duds and has left the streets of the barrio for the boardroom of her own film production company. Writing about *Justify My Love* for *The Village Voice*, critic Richard Goldstein thanked Madonna for making it "harder to hurt people,"<sup>10</sup> implying that the legions of Madonna fans who formerly identified with her through clothing will now identify with her newly explicit sexual politics, that is, with her acceptance of gay and other sexualities. On first appraisal Goldstein's assertion seems shockingly naive. For it is obvious that, rather than signalling liberation for gays and lesbians, the "suspension of power" and "erotic dissent"<sup>11</sup> which *Justify My Love* supposedly propagates will first of all signal ideological or sexual liberation for a certain class of straight, white women whose own position of relative empowerment allows them to identify with Madonna the powerhouse.

10. Goldstein, p.52.

11. *ibid.*, p.52.



Under this reading the liberatory potential of Madonna's *Justify My Love* video is similarly limited in her 1990 "Rock the Vote" campaign. In commercials broadcast on MTV, Madonna encouraged young adults to exercise their right to vote with the lyrics "Dr. King, Malcolm X/Freedom of speech is as good as sex." Making her point about people power by sexualizing politics instead of politicizing sex, Madonna effectively lost

sight of gay and lesbian struggles around sexuality, and the black civil rights movement. Similarly, in the summer of 1990, Madonna revived the late-eighties Saturday night practices of poor, urban, black and hispanic, gay drag queens with her hit single *Vogue*. Singing "it makes no difference if you're black

or white, if you're a boy or a girl" Madonna suspended colour and gender hierarchies. She gave Voguing to everyone, but in the process she took it away from those for whom it was once much more than a hot new dance style. It would seem that lately Madonna has been practicing a sophisticated form of appropriation which sells the thrill of a fleeting identification with sexual, social and political margins to straight,

white, middle-class kids who can (literally and figuratively) afford to temporarily indulge in such a luxury.

# MADONNA!



## VII

Welcome Into My  
Queendom,  
Cum One Cum All,  
I Call Out To Those Who  
Had A Hard Day

attributed to Madonna, *Jerk* 1990

She shimmies into  
our fag imagination,  
spreads her legs  
for our dyke  
appropriation,  
grabs us by the  
pudenda and makes us  
face things we didn't think it  
was possible to learn from  
pop music.

Michael Musto, *Outweek* 1991

Where this cynical argument about Madonna's appropriation of the image of marginality loses force in its ability to foresee the liberatory potential of gay re-appropriation.

tion of the image of Madonna. For example, in the Summer 1990 issue of *Jerk*, a San Francisco-based, xeroxed, handbook for "safer sex" which features beefcake and a series of short fantasy scenarios, Madonna makes several appearances as a kind of sexual lubricant. One of the fantasies reads: "You're at an AIDS benefit with your pal Madonna. In the dressing room, one of her dancers is wearing nothing but a Raiders jacket. You both aim and cum on the mirror."<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in this issue of *Jerk*, a photo spread features a cute guy lounging around in his underwear, reading and being aroused by an Interview magazine spread on Madonna. The cover of this issue of *Interview*, in which Madonna is shown grabbing her crotch, is reproduced in part on another page of *Jerk*, and is cropped in such a way as to emphasize the star's crotch-grabbing gesture. This image is captioned with the lines quoted above, a punning invitation to sexual ecstasy attributed to Madonna.

Each of these gay appropriations of the image of Madonna involves a reading of that image, one which is designed to recontextualize the singer's image, and bring it in line with a gay fantasy. The first fantasy produces a clever play on the conditions involved in straight fantasies about Madonna. In this scenario Madonna plays a role similar to that of Susan in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. She is the passport to sexual adventure. She is the star who animates the AIDS benefit, surrounds herself with an entourage of gay dancers, and takes her fan backstage where he finds that he is the centre of a spectacle engineered just for him. The Raiders jacket, an article of clothing habitually worn by straight black Los Angeles rappers and their fans, recalls Susan's funky jacket ("it used to belong to Jimi Hendrix"), and marks this gay Madonna as a knowing spoof of the singer's longstanding, ambiguous relationship to "blackness."

While the straight press has made much out of Madonna's "ironic" or "empowering" appropriation of the male rock star's crotch-grabbing gesture of sexual potency,<sup>13</sup> *Jerk* places the image of Madonna palming her crotch in a different context - that of gay male pornography. By including this image of Madonna in photo spreads featuring gay men fondling their crotches, *Jerk* reads through the singer's image back to the suppressed homoerotic overtones of rap and rock star virility. At the same time, the addition of the caption attributed to Madonna produces another, complementary reading of this image. When the star invites the *Jerk* reader to enter Queendom she does so not only as the female sovereign of a fantasy land of equal sexual opportunity, but also as a drag queen fully equipped to relieve her male subject of his hardship. By insisting on the iconography of Madonna's image, *Jerk* calls our attention to the singer's excessively and artificially feminine form, and to the (stereotypically) masculine potency it unsuccessfully conceals. Thus, in this fantasy, Madonna is "revealed" to be a gay male transvestite, a female impersonator, a woman wannabe.

This "revelation" of the wannabe in Madonna is the key to

an empowering appropriation of her image. And, however surprising gay re-appropriation of the image of Madonna may be, it can by no means be seen as a reading against the grain, for Madonna herself invites this form of re-appropriation when she proclaims her own creative investment in identification. With the release of *Truth or Dare*, a behind-the-scenes documentary of her 1990 Blond Ambition tour, Madonna has reiterated her support for gay lifestyles and for the politics of gay liberation. Onscreen Madonna emphasizes her identification with her large troupe of gay dancers, casting herself as den-mother and fellow "emotional cripple." The singer works to replace or recreate the families her dancers lost because of their sexuality, or their career choices, by identifying herself as/with the mother she lost to cancer as a young child. Offscreen, in interviews with the gay press, she likens the persecution of gay men in touch with their "femininity" to the persecution she has suffered as an unconventionally "masculine" woman, and draws a comparison between the exploitation of Tony Ward's work as a gay porn model and her own experience of the scandalous release of old nude art photos.<sup>14</sup>

Onscreen and offscreen Madonna is always the heroine of some sort of story, either of her own rise to stardom, or a fictionalized - but faintly autobiographical - story played out on video. Madonna plays roles. She is a character. Whether she is investing in an identity borrowed from a movie star, constructed through clashing stereotypes, fleshed out through other attendant bodies, designed to convey a political message, or assumed to heal psychic wounds, Madonna sets an irresistible example easily followed by her wannabes.

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by Susan Lord

## Bad Magic

GERMAINE DULAC'S *LA SOURIANTE MADAME BEUDET*

Its burgeoning power that breaks through the still well established barrier of incomprehension, of prejudice and of laziness in order to reveal itself in the beauty of a new form, nobly substantiates its claims (to be an art).<sup>1</sup>

Germaine Dulac, 1927



Between 1915 and 1940 Germaine Dulac made 26 films and a number of newsreels. Two films, *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (*The Smiling Madame Beudet*) and *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (*The Seashell and the Clergyman*), are extant in their entirety. A few fragments from the other works are held in the archives of the Cinémathèque Française. She wrote for two leading feminist newspapers (*La Française* and *La Fronde*) and a variety of film journals, edited a cinema journal (*Schemas*), and gave public lectures. Most of this work remains in the archive, but for a few essays on film theory which have been anthologized. She also helped organize a union for technical workers in the industry, helped establish and participated in ciné clubs, taught film courses at the *Ecole Technique de Photographie et de Cinématographie*, and created a production company, D.E.L.I.A. Film, through which she made three films. The accounts given of her work by her contemporary reviewers and by Charles Ford (whose commentaries stand in for the now irretrievable films) suggest that she constantly reformulated the aesthetic possibilities specific to the film medium, a consistent experimentation which was intimately tied to her dedicated interest in the articulation of subjective space, particularly the subjective space of women; and co-extensive with her filmmaking was her commitment to the creation of a new public for art. I wish here to provide fodder for speculation in an arena left unanalyzed in contemporary readings of *La Souriante Mme Beudet*: the imbrication of technology and gender inherent in the medium itself.

We know that that which is will have another face tomorrow, and we are already trying to pick out the features of this new face in the midst of the future. Yesterday's truth at first obscures tomorrow's, before giving way to it, but we, a generation committed to progress, refuse to remain in its shadow.<sup>2</sup>

Within the context of Modernism generally, this sense of immanence and vision of progress is common. For Dulac this vision is measured by the realization that science makes "the entire world bow down before the mechanical invention."<sup>3</sup> Hence, she believes that art's moral function is, in cinema, to free thought from instrumentalization by "playing with matter and the imponderable" as they move through time.<sup>4</sup> In her theoretical writings, Dulac clearly situates herself within the juncture of Symbolism and the avant-garde of Modernism: the Ideal, synthesis, and the ineffable quality of the soul and nature, are interlinked through the belief that art must be utterly transformed, it must "be life" and must not be "limited to the human person." And, central to this is Dulac's growing distrust of narrative. This hybrid Romanticism, shared by other artists of her time (most notably the Surrealists), participates in Modernism's critique of modernity.

The autonomous art of the nineteenth century depended fitfully upon the internal development of pure forms. Technologies of image reproduction, originating as they did out of instrumental sciences and put to use for social control under the guise of care, were hardly viable as the bedding ground of autonomous art. Dulac's impassioned commitment to the creation of a new time-based art—hence her use of analogies that link film to musical rhythm and poetry<sup>5</sup>—was

driven in part by the belief that the traditional forms could no longer truthfully express contemporary psychological experience. Of course, this sense of urgency and possibility was shared by many of her contemporaries in France, Germany and Russia. But facing Dulac was not only the complex task of developing film as a new autonomous art; she also intended that this medium's new aesthetic forms would illuminate meanings specific to women's experience which had heretofore been ignored, denied, occluded or obfuscated. The question of creating a new subject and a new subject matter for art—which implicitly challenges the constitutive elements which define art's autonomy—was complicated by more than just the obvious problem of the objectification of women in art. In addition, there is the further problem of the intention to alter the constitution of the public sphere through film technology in a way that would stand in diametric opposition to the way in which the inclusion of women (as objects of scientific discourse) in the public sphere was effected via previous technologies since the 18th century. Hence, in the task that she set for herself, Dulac faced a double, or quadruple bind, the strands of which, when unravelled are: 1) the development of a new art form, 2) autonomous art and film technology, 3) the objectification of women in art, 4) the production of the public woman through technology. In a sense, Dulac seized the means of the technologized production of women in order to make, in this new, seventh art, a public sphere for the subjectification of women.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the question of gender and technology as it is reflected upon in *Souriante* is only one aspect of the film's multivalent exploration of gender, aesthetics and modernity. The operations of the unconscious as the "royal road" to alterity (as with the Surrealists), the experience of and provocation through estrangement or shock (as with Dada), the significance of boredom and the meaning of the tragic in modern life (as with Proust): all of these problems underpinning modernist aesthetics are set askew in *Souriante*.

#### WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE IN HER?

In an essay entitled "Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth Century Anatomy," Linda Schiebinger argues that the dedicated interest given to women by medical science and technology during the Enlightenment was due to the social question of "natural rights." Women's place, value, function and meaning in the public sphere was a problem given to science to determine:

Beginning in the 1750's, doctors in France and Germany called for a finer delineation of sex differences; discovering, describing and defining sex differences in every bone, muscle, nerve and vein of the human body became a research priority in anatomical sciences... [The] scientific measure of woman's lesser "natural reason" was used to buttress arguments against women's participation in the public spheres of government and commerce, science and scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

1. Germaine Dulac (1927), "The Aesthetics, the Obstacles: Integral Cinegraphie." Translated and introduction by Stuart Liebman. *Framework*, no. 19 (1982) p.6.

2. Germaine Dulac (1925), "The Essence of Cinema." *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by P. Adams Sitney (New York, New York University Press, 1978) p.36.

3. Germaine Dulac (1925), "The Essence of Cinema." *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by P. Adams Sitney (New York, New York University Press, 1978) p.36.

4. Germaine Dulac (1932), "The Avant-Garde Cinema." Translated by Robert Lambertson, *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, p.46.

5. Dulac was not the first filmmaker to draw the analogy with music, but her use of poetry is quite unique. The poetics of modernism, as analyzed by Ezra Pound, is insistent upon poetry's temporality. For an analysis of the historical development of a filmic imagination evident in painting and literature, see Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art*, vols. 3 & 4.

6. For a discussion of women as the new public for film in Germany, see Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). I have not yet come across a similar analysis of the French reception of early cinema.

7. Schiebinger, Linda. "Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth Century Anatomy." *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*. Edited by Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) pp.42-3.





This initiation into modernity, circumscribed as it is by natural science, produces woman as discourse on the one hand, and invention on the other.

In the nineteenth century, as Charcot was using photography to narrate the pathological discourse of woman, the law put this image to use in the invention of the criminal body of the prostitute by "documenting" the various bodily deformations — from the skull to the labia — inherent in the "public woman."<sup>8</sup> The technology of image reproduction had, therefore, become engendered well before Muybridge set the female body in motion. In other words, the female body is activated, or narrativized, by a proliferation of discourses which beg the question: What do you want to see in her? Linda Williams' study of Muybridge and Méliès, "Film Body: The Implantation of Perversions," locates a response to this question in the repetition of compulsion of fetishism: "[F]or both men the naked body of the woman, whether boldly and repeatedly figured by Muybridge...or briefly and coyly glimpsed [by Méliès], poses the problem of sexual difference which it then becomes the work of the incipient forms of narrative and *mise-en-scène* to overcome."<sup>9</sup>

Williams points out that these early producers of the moving image "privilege the body as pure object of truth in their work. For Muybridge this truth is scientific" and for Méliès it is "both magical and mysterious."<sup>10</sup> But, as Schiebinger stated earlier, the female body becomes science's object for reasons quite different than does the male body. And, of course for Muybridge, the mechanization of the male body is in the interest of industrialization. In apposition to this, the female body is constructed as a release from industry's degradations (Muybridge sets the female body in various domestic spaces); it functions as an image that, by its pretense to provide a "difference" free from the repetitive sameness of industrial processes, not only legitimates that humiliating sameness, but also becomes, via industrialization itself, a fetish-object. Nonetheless, what is of interest here is the compulsion, on the part of Muybridge, to activate the female body diegetically, to invest that body, through narrative, with a "surplus of erotic meaning." This early form of cinematic invention of a body for the purpose of being activated by the desire of the inventor takes a bizarre little twist with Méliès the magician who proliferates these bodies in countless numbers, makes them appear and disappear, turns them into and out of machines, dismembers and re-integrates them, and spies on them. What was for Méliès a childish delight — like pulling the legs off spiders — becomes for Dulac a problem lurking at the heart of the basic apparatus itself. Mme. Beudet, try as she might, is unable to free herself of the ocular apparatuses which watch over her everyday life and intrude upon her most intimate desires.

*Beudet* contains numerous devices which operate to derail the scopic position of the female as well as the narrativization of her pathologies. Dulac's distrust of the possibilities of narrative in cinema, while evident in *Beudet*, reaches its limit in her final films (before her work with the newsreel) where narrative has disappeared in favour of pure form. The problems inherited from the novelistic film made, by the late 1920's, any figural use of women increasingly problematic, and the

boundaries between the "illustrated novel" and patriotism — combined with the varieties of nationalism at work in French culture and society by the 1930's — made film narrativity utterly compromised. In *Beudet*, then, the restlessness of Dulac's aesthetic takes a turn which indicts the very origins of the film medium, along with other forms of art, popular culture and social institutions. And this moment of critical reflection within and about the medium is activated by its most unlikely suspect: Mme. Beudet.

#### PLAYING WITH GUNS

There's not much of a plot. Mme. and M. Beudet live in the provinces and, as the closing titles tell, are "joined by habit." M. Beudet relieves his boredom by taunting his wife with the possibility that he will kill himself: he repeatedly points an unloaded gun to his temple. Mme. Beudet lives with her boredom and unhappiness by playing the piano, reading books and magazines, conjuring dream lovers and by loading — unknown to him — her insufferable husband's gun. One evening M. Beudet goes to the opera, locking his wife's piano before leaving. Mme. Beudet spends the evening conjuring images of escape and pleasure. She loads the gun, and is haunted throughout the night by images of her confinement: domestic objects, the "House of Detention and Corrections" (the inter-title being: Always the same horizons...), and the phantasmatic appearances of her husband. The next morning M. Beudet rails against women ("Women: Do you know what is to be done with them?"), crushes a doll's head in his fist, pulls out the gun, and unwittingly aims it at his temple. But before pulling the trigger, he points it in his wife's direction. The gun goes off, just missing Mme. Beudet, and shattering a vase of flowers. M. Beudet consoles his wife whom he believes wished to commit suicide.

This consolation is parodied by the appearance — in the upper portion of the screen — of puppets performing a melodramatic resolution. The film then ends as it began with a dreary view of Chartres and a shot from behind the couple as they walk up a cobbled street. The addition of a priest who passes them on the street is matched with a contiguous sense of closure as the shot of the back of Mme. Beudet's head delimits our access to her subjective space: an iris out, a screen gone black. The opening title is repeated ("In the provinces...") and added to: "In the quiet streets, without horizon, under the heavy sky...Joined together by habit."<sup>11</sup> This sense of infinite repetition is suggestive not only of the

8. For a much more thorough discussion of the historical place, function and development of optics and the social body, see Janine Marchessault, "An Erotics of Space," *Public*, no. 2 (1989). As Schiebinger's survey shows, 19th century medical science expands its range of "subject matter" by using blacks as further objects of difference. Also see Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation and Difference and Pathology*.

9. Linda Williams, "Film Body: The Implantation of Perversions," p.22

10. *ibid.*, p.22

11. Translation of all titles are taken from Flitterman-Lewis. I also rely on her articulation of the "fantasy-solitude sequence" which I discuss below.





entrapment of women in an array of institutions; there is also the intimation of a film loop through which Mme. Beudet's objective and subjective conditions are mediated, measured and repeated.

As this final sequence indicates, Dulac manages to embed a simple plot with devices which work to dislocate our expectations in a number of arenas. The "signature" of the film is the use of the common domestic setting for a complex "fantasy-solitude sequence," the longest sequence in the film, during which Mme. Beudet's "subjective vision is constructed through a series of montage units, of seven smaller segments [each of which] is structured by a different principle of technical device, alternating montage pattern, or cinematic punctuation, allowing the full range of expressive possibilities of the cinema to come into play."<sup>12</sup>

This "cinematic specificity" is, hence, used to articulate an expressive and critical feminist content. For instance, the bourgeois institution of marriage becomes life-threatening, and its external adjuncts of the state and church offer only punishment and further confinement. This experience is redoubled in reference to art and popular culture. The reference to Emma Bovary is evident, but Dulac reinvestigates the "Bovarian" condition. First of all, Mme. Beudet is not constructed through such a pathological narrative of self-immolation. Nor is it only the "duped" petty bourgeois woman with her fantasies inscribed by popular culture who is in danger. The indictment extends to art itself (Baudelaire, Debussy and Gounod's Faust figure prominently, as does the popular press) which is supposed to free thought but which here serves to further Mme. Beudet's entrapment through its ignorance, denial, occlusion, obfuscation and fetishization of woman's experience. The pervasive sense of interdictions imposed through inversions of the ideological functions of care and protection, and the aesthetic principles of freedom and autonomy are internalized by Mme. Beudet. Dulac then articulates this internalization by featuring an inverted "Méliès the conjuror" scenario. The notion that Beudet's psychic life is invented, in part, by early cinema has been argued by Judith Mayne in her book *Woman at the Keyhole*:

While Dulac's film is technically more sophisticated than many films of the 1920's, it is characterized by a selective, foregrounded use of 'primitive' narration. For Mme. Beudet fantasizes in a 'primitive mode.' She is like the dreamers in early films who imagine fictional characters coming to life as they nod over a book, or like a conjuror in a Méliès film who makes threatening objects disappear — usually women, in Méliès' case; her husband in the case of Mme. Beudet.<sup>13</sup>

My divergence from Mayne concerns the significant fact that Mme. Beudet is *unable* to make M. Beudet disappear.

Throughout the film Mme. Beudet smiles twice. The first instance is, in fact, outright laughter inspired by a fantasy of

her dream lover — whom she has conjured from the pages of a popular magazine — dumping M. Beudet out the window while the "real" M. Beudet sits at his desk calculating his expenses. The second occasion is a slow, self-directed smile of pleasure once the husband has left and she is alone with her dream lover. This smile signals the inversion from pleasure to terror as the conjuring tricks which initially gave her pleasure, due to her manipulation of them, turn into a Mélièsian machine over which she has no control. In a "subsegment," which Flitterman-Lewis reads as a fantasmatic projection in which Beudet becomes a character in her own fiction, Mme. Beudet throws her wedding ring away, only to have it reappear on her finger. This crucial moment of self-objectification in an image projection over which she loses control exposes the limits of Mme. Beudet's psychic autonomy. Dulac's manipulation of technology does not free Beudet from the circumstances of narrativity which historically work to punish and pathologize: the machine takes control, reproducing and activating multiple images of M. Beudet as he appears and disappears, taunting and terrorizing her, his face distorted and grotesque. Unlike Méliès the conjuror who, in *Extraordinary Illusions*, after having some difficulty controlling the apparition, simply rips it to pieces, Mme. Beudet is not only unable to control the projections and apparitions; they actually gain corporeality. What is childish delight for Méliès is, in fact, something to be afraid of.

The critical self-reflection about film and technology, activated as it is through the condition of Mme. Beudet, reveals the destructive element implicit in both narrativity and historical progress. *Beudet* does not show a subject creating and destroying images; instead, it reveals the creation of subjection. Nor does the image produced exist as a monument to the creative/destructive subject; instead, the image exists to reveal the mechanisms of subjection. Dulac's refusal of the Mélièsian delight in favour of an examination of domination unleashed, and produced, as it is in technology, indicates a critical and self-critical film practice which historically situates the imbrication of technology and gender. Dulac's work not only participates in Modernism's critique of modernity, it also provides us with a means by which to reconsider, from within, the internal contradictions of Modernism itself.

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12. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990) p.105

13. Judith Mayne, *Women at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p.194.

# Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema

FROM INTROSPECTION TO RETROSPECTION

by Janine Marchessault

If English Canada has an Experimental film tradition it is one in which the efforts of women filmmakers have been largely absent. This can be attributed to the fact that, with very few exceptions, films produced by women have not conformed to the rigours of an international modernism. Nor can they be seen to correspond to the structural material concerns generally identified with the names of Michael Snow, Jack Chambers and David Rimmer. Indeed, the distinction between avant-garde and Experimental cinema is useful for understanding feminist film culture in this country.

The Canadian experimental legacy is short (just over two and a half decades) in comparison with the American experimental film tradition (almost fifty years). This discrepancy reflects not only the utilitarian influence of a state supported film industry which relegated experimentation to animation (because of its affiliation to painting) but also an exhibition system monopolized by Hollywood interests. It is within the art gallery circuits of the late sixties and early seventies that experimental film practices emerge in Canada. Many of its early practitioners (Snow, Rimmer, Chambers, Greg Curnoe, Charles Gagnon and Joyce Wieland for example) were working as artists in other media (for the most part painting and sculpture) before turning their attention to film. The artist-filmmakers would be given a place in the newly created film societies and clubs which, for the most part, were affiliated with academic insti-

tutions (McGill, U.of T., Western, Simon Fraser).

Though marginal, the position occupied by film within the gallery and the academy reflected a drive away from the hegemonies and hierarchies of discipline towards new forms of interdisciplinary art and epistemology. While the motivation for this shift is arguably postmodernist, it did nothing to upset the categories of modernism. Rather than foregrounding ideological

questions related to the institutions of auratic art, experimental films affirmed the formation of a new genre both within the academy and the gallery. These early affiliations have worked to ensure the institutional and canonical framework for the emergence of a 'uniquely' Canadian Experimental cinema.

The differences between avant-garde and modernist impulses can be located in their relation to the institutions of art: while the historical avant-garde reacted to the commodification of art by seeking to reintegrate art into the social (Bürger), modernist art works continued to be characterized







*Transitions*  
by Barbara Sternberg

by a contradictory insistence on autonomy, on hermetic forms which could not be readily consumed. The reified tenets of modernism in Canadian Experimental cinema are derived from a Fine Art tradition and, supported by its institutions, are founded on an adversarial relation between high art and mass culture. This hostility is what distinguishes Experimental from avant-garde films. It is expressly in their relation to popular culture, its institutional supports and the pleasures of its promise that feminist avant-garde films are antithetical to the Experimental tradition.

This, however, does not mean that the alliance between an avant-garde and a feminist cultural politic has ever been simple. If feminists began making avant-garde films in order to give difference expression, then the expression of difference also opened the door to profound contradictions: to differences between women. Where the feminist movement has always insisted on a unifying gendered identity as the basis for political solidarity, the avant-garde has historically rejected any such identifying unity on the grounds that art must disrupt the hegemonic processes of an affirmative culture (i.e., market forces and the forces of identity construction are often highly compatible). The union has paved the way for a feminist politic that posits the



*Reason Over Passion*, by Joyce Wieland

solidarity of women not as natural but as historical, not as given but as something to be struggled over.

In contrast to the somewhat more consolidated aesthetic concerns of the Experimental tradition, feminist avant-garde films in Canada exceed simple delineation. From neo-narratives to experimental documentaries, from autobiographical and biographical chronicles to video hybrids, from live performance super 8 to feature narratives, one thing is clear: there is no normative aesthetic programme for a feminist avant-garde culture.

In their diversity, feminist avant-garde films over the past decade have been characterized by forms which negate the myths of creation and origin, which favour difference over unity, and which refuse the boundaries of margins and cen-

tres that patriarchal capitalism constructs. Yet more than unity in diversity, I would like to propose that across two decades of feminist film culture, we can distinguish the formation of an identity politic that has shifted from feminine introspection to feminist retrospection, that has transformed the private sphere of personal rumination into a new historiography intent on expanding the public sphere to include women. This development is neither synchronous nor singularly linear, but is characterized by insistent and simultaneous calls to difference across many sites.

#### **FEMININE INTROSPECTION**

Consistently employing materials and themes linked to the



private sphere of women's experiences, Joyce Wieland's films introduce the identity politic so crucial to the exploration of sexual difference in feminist films of the 1970s and 1980s. Kay Armatage has argued that Wieland's insistence on the feminine as a subject worthy of artistic investigation sets her apart from her Experimental *confrères*:

As an artist, Wieland has consistently and consciously sought out the feminine precisely as a site of potential images which have remained unexplored by her male counterparts, and in which she could construct an aesthetic based upon a tradition which she saw as belonging to women.<sup>1</sup>

Wieland's efforts to do this can be traced across an impressive range of work: from embroidery and quilting to hand tinted film, from 8mm 'home movies' to a narrative feature. In *Watersark* (1964-65) Wieland films kitchen objects (crocery, rubber gloves, a tea pot) as well as her own body to discover and define a feminine space; fabric dyes are applied directly to footage and quilting needles are used to create perforations in *Handtinting* (1967-68); domestic genres (such as the structural conventions of the fairytale in *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968) and the melodrama in her feature narrative *The Far Shore* (1976) are called upon to explore popular forms of narration generally associated with women's culture; and *Reason Over Passion* (1967-69) according to Kass Banning is the quintessential girl road movie.<sup>2</sup>

### Home Movies

The aesthetic implications of women's traditional hand crafts stimulate the dialectal sphere of Wieland's investigations, providing her with the agency to explore a new feminine language. Over and again it is the artisanal 'home-made' aspects of filmmaking that are emphasized, just as some of her plastic wall hangings are made to look like film strips ("Stuffed Movie," "Home Movie," "War and Peace, 8mm home movie" (1966). Importantly, this combination does not work to reinstate the trace of the artist as divine but rather, by referencing the handicraft, recalls a sacral past: art as an empowering collective activity.

Wieland reclaims this history to constitute a new history of film — not as auratic high art nor as mass product but as *craft* which embodies at once individual idiosyncrasy and a history of shared meaning.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, her project bears none of the nihilistic undertones of American Pop Art but derives from it a disregard for the boundaries of high and low art. Although her work encompasses an implicit critique of modernism's evolutionary telos, her aesthetic framework is reconstructive rather than deconstructive. Unquestionably, her approach can be seen to inaugurate the radical notions of authorship implicit in feminist appropriation strategies of the last decade. The notion of feminist authorship, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> provides an alternative to the Great Author of bourgeois individualism, without relinquishing the "rebellious subjectivity" and political agency that Barthes' *Dead Author* rescinds.

Current theorizations have related the feminine to the

fragmented space of allegory where totalizing mythologies are eroded and decentred, where the whole picture gives way to many partial views: to details.<sup>5</sup> Undeniably, it is the very limiting aspects of film, its inability to magnify details and gestures from the everyday that have served Wieland's practice. Yet in her films the feminine is more than intrusive and allegorical, more than a rhetorical device of sublime negation — the feminine constitutes and is constituted through, as Lauren Rabinovitz has insisted, Wieland's experiences and perceptions as a woman.<sup>6</sup> Working within a pre-feminist context, Wieland's films espouse a feminist sensibility by making the personal political, by seeking new ways to represent those aspects of women's lives and consciousness deemed inconsequential to the grander narratives of history (*Watersark* and *Handtinting* being exemplary films). It is in the fragment and through the gaps that Wieland finds the stylistic lexicon to build on a tradition of women's culture.

Not surprisingly, the magnification of silent lips is a favourite motif in many of Wieland's films and her object art. Frozen between a yearning to speak and an unwillingness to be spoken, the magnification underscores an onerous introspection; as motif it embodies at once a parodic celebration of femininity and a desire to overcome its silence. If we trace this image across a decade of films — the silent playful lips in

1. Kay Armatage, "The Feminine Body," *Dialogue: Canadian and Quebec Cinema*, ed. Pierre Veronneau, Michael Dorland and Seth Feldman (Montreal: La Cinématèque Québécoise & Media Texte), 1987, p.286. It is worth noting that Wieland's emphasis on the feminine has led male critics to characterize her work as "sentimental" and "naive," "impish" and "less complex than Snow's." Her omission from New York's Anthology film archives (devoted to experimental cinema) in the early 1970s reflects not only this kind of critical appraisal but her extreme divergence from the sensibilities of the New York underground.

2. Kass Banning, "From Didactics to Desire," *Work in Progress: Building Feminist Culture*, (Toronto: The Women's Press), 1987, p.175 (ff.30).

3. As with the acclaimed *True Patriot of Love* exhibition in 1971 at the National Gallery, the retrospective of her work at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1987 is the result of certain liberal directives which have done nothing to unsettle the rigid foundations of art historical practices. Her presence in the gallery is somewhat disturbing not only because her work is, in so many ways, antithetical to the heroic context of Great Art but also because the most radical aspects of her practice are effectively silenced.

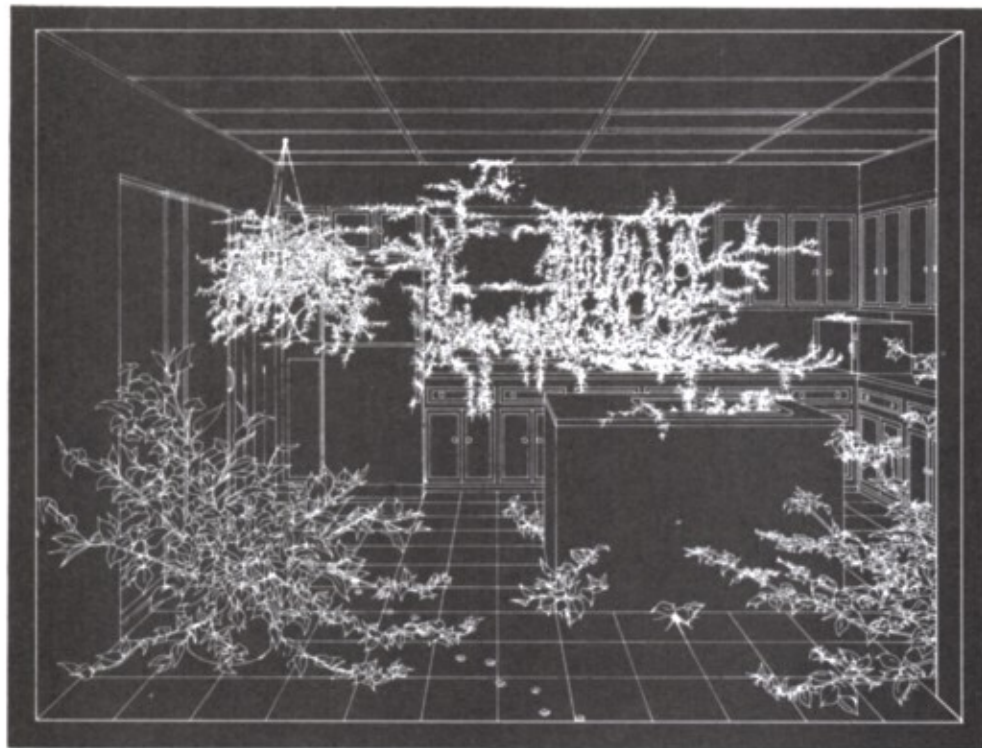
Questions relating to the very constitution of high art and its supports, to a specificity and a typology of women's experiences which extend the possibility of a differential system of exhibition and mode of reception have formed the basis of Wieland's art since the early sixties.

4. "Some Thoughts on Feminist Authorship," *Open Letter*, Fall, 1991

5. See for example Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987). Or Christine Buci-Glucksmann, "Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern," *Representations* #14, (Spring 1986).

6. Lauren Rabinovitz, "The Films of Joyce Wieland," *Joyce Wieland*, Art Gallery of Ontario catalogue, 1987.





*Watersark*, the muted chanting of her own patriotism in *Reason Over Passion* and the lovers' conversation in *The Far Shore* — we detect a growing extroversion, a growing desire to move from a silent elsewhere, from the muted contradiction of a language imposed, to speak. Over a ten year period, from *Watersark* to *The Far Shore*, the category of Woman is progressively imbued with historical specificity, progressively grounded in place — from her own home to her own country.

If Wieland refuses the totalizing languages of national and imperial discourses in *Reason over Passion*, she also insists that the unity of women be defined through an historical materialism rather than an essential femininity. Perhaps the most influential aspect of her art for feminist avant-garde practices in English Canada, is a career which spans the boundaries of short super 8 films and feature narrative filmmaking. Such a trajectory, by no means linear (Wieland has returned to her short experimental films and her object art), is perfectly commensurate with the extroversion described above, with the aspiration to move out of the private sphere of her own personal experiences (the triple marginalization of being Canadian, a woman and making avant-garde films) into the public sphere, the shared meanings of narrative cinema. But importantly, there is no one place, genre, style that is free from the contradictions of language, identity and capital.

#### MAKING ROOM FOR CONTRADICTION

Despite Seth Feldman's claim that a colonized silence is the

chief stylistic feature in English Canadian cinema since Grierson,<sup>7</sup> feminist films have sought to overcome silence by formulating intricate sound-image relations. In effect, the extensive use of off-screen voices and voice-over narration has become their central distinguishing mark, countering a history of images which speak for themselves. Ironically, it is via a return to Grierson, to his fervent beliefs in the cinema as "hammer," that feminists have confronted the statist authority his cinema was intended to support.

Films like *The Central Character* (1977) by Patricia Gruben and Kay Armatage's *Speakbody* (1979) materialize two overlapping genres — new narrative and experimental documentary — in many ways paradigmatic of two dominant tendencies within feminist avant-garde cinema of the 1980s. While Gruben's film relies on a sequential linearity (which it disrupts) derived from the fairytale, *Speakbody* grows out of the social documentary associated with early feminist filmmaking. Both films displace generic categories by combining the conventions of docu-

mentary and fiction; and, as I will suggest, both pave the way for a heterogeneous feminist body politic.

#### The Central Character

Though Wieland's foray into feature filmmaking with *The Far Shore* marks an important interface between avant-garde and popular culture, *The Central Character* extends the shattering of generic boundaries to a feminist imperative. The division between centres and margins, between inside and outside as between avant-garde and popular culture is shown to be part and parcel of a patriarchal order. Gruben begins by disrupting the opposition between nature and culture that the figure of Woman has always been made to mediate. Amidst ferns and greenery Gruben's character finds herself immersed in a bathtub; hair sprawled out like the sprouting potatoes in her kitchen, she embodies a pun: nature as culture. Just as the female narrator comes to break down the subject/object divide by confusing 'she' and 'I,' so too does it become impossible to distinguish the inside (her kitchen) from the outside (the woods).

Indeed, the second half of the film, which has the central character (now somewhat de-centred through the voice-over narration) wandering into a petrified forest, reveals the woods to be nothing more than a domestic junkyard. Upon

7. Seth Feldman, "The Silent Subject in English Canadian Film," *Take Two* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), pp.48-57.



the ruins of history and language, a women's voice relays a formidable tautology: "that I would like to say that I would like to say that...." It is because there is no outside in Gruben's universe, because desire has no origin, no centre, that her fairytale finds no resolution: THERE IS NO WAY OUT OF THE WOODS.

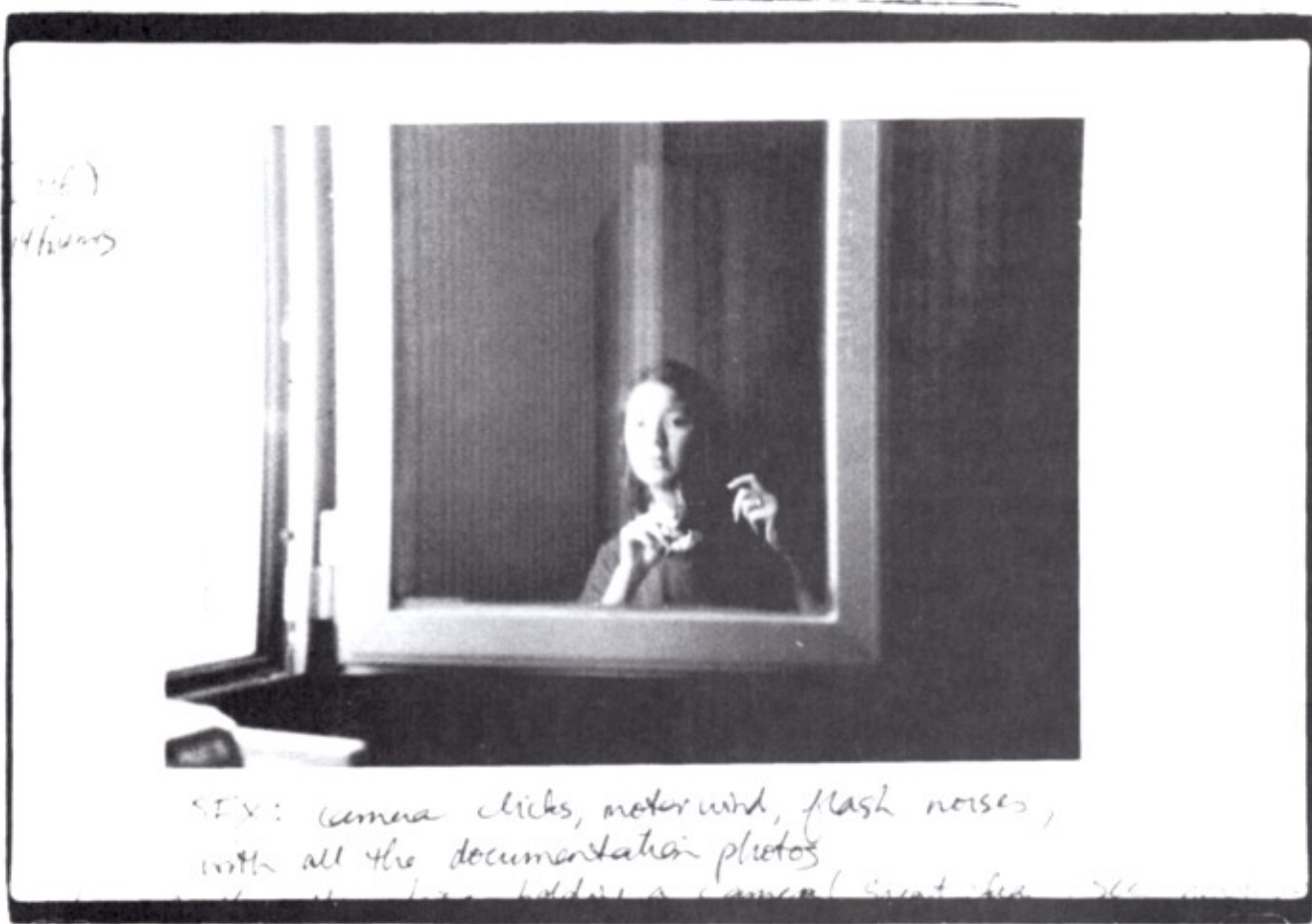
*The Central Character*, like many of Wieland's films, teeters over the abyss of the epistemic crisis: how to use patriarchal language to challenge patriarchy? The collapse of nature into culture suggests the creation of postmodern forms of cinema that are perhaps distinct but never separate from the representational resonances of an older order. It is not surprising, given this, that Gruben's subsequent films would, to a greater and greater degree, engage directly with the conventions of narrative cinema steering traditional visual pleasures towards

political ends.

Many films have grown out of the trajectory carved by *The Central Character*, exploring the colonization of a female imaginary by relegating feminine introspection to a sequestered imprisoning space. In stark contrast the celebration of the endemic domestic sphere in *Watersark*, the female protagonist in Barbara Sternberg's *Transitions* (1982) remains incarcerated within the purgatorial space of her bedroom. Between dream and reality, between sleep and waking, she is besieged by a cacophony of women's voices that keep her suspended in a reified hiatus. The filmmaker in Anna Gronau's *Mary Mary* (1988) cannot decide whether she is making a dream or a story and she too is trapped within the narcissistic expanse of her bed — speaking into a microphone, looking into a mirror, trapped within a labyrinth of doubled origins. The domestic



*Mary Mary* by Anna Gronau



*You Take Care Now* by Ann Marie Fleming

domain is at best only an unhappy refuge from the perils of the outside world in Lori Spring's *Inside Out* (1988) and Ann Marie Fleming's *You Take Care Now* (1989). More than imprisoning, the private sphere has also set the stage for a parodied panopticon of phallogocentric desire: the "One Vision" in Paula Fairfield's *Fragments* (1989) and Kathleen Maitland-Carter's infamous menstrual film *Inside Upstairs* (1988) which treats scopophilic desire to a blood bath of razors and tampons. The discourses of origin are further imploded through the parodied art history in Annette Manguard's *The Iconography of Venus* (1987) and the commodification of black skin in Glace Lawrence's *Desire* (1990).

In the context of feminist theory, these films and many others not mentioned here, present an important challenge.

Against the essentializing impetus of French feminism's *écriture féminine*, as well as the Anglo-American emphasis on experimental cinema, they dis-place female desire. Moving beyond idealist oppositions, ideology critique surrenders to a thinking through the body. The gaping reification of the feminine in so many of these films clears the way for the inscription of a cultured and gendered body.

Geography is history and it is by representing women's bodies in spaces filled with noisy contradictions (reconstructing rather than deconstructing those spaces) that feminist avant-garde films have migrated from an introspective 'elsewhere' to a more localized space where race, class and sexuality are among the many things that make up the politics of feminist culture and identity. From this space has emerged an



elaborate politics of naming intent on exploring differences between women. That is, as Adrienne Rich has phrased it, "on seeing difference differently."<sup>8</sup>

### RELOCATING ALTERITY

The vast resurgence of feminist documentaries over the past five years reflects the desire to define and construct women's experiences and histories in ways that offset our cultural and political marginalization. While identity formation was an essential feature in the feminist documentaries of the early 1970s, the cinema-verité style of these films stressed women's shared experiences. Recent avant-garde documentaries appear more intent on forging discrete identities and subjectivities to construct broader understanding of community.

### *Speakbody*

Kay Armatage is a seminal influence in this respect. Armatage radicalizes the most conservative aspects of expository cinema by transforming the unitary authority of traditional voice-over narration into a discursive political commentary. The eloquent and evocative structure of *Speakbody* combines documentary and fiction to consolidate a diversity of women's experiences around abortion. Addressing topics ranging from birth control and women's wages to fear and anger, the heterogeneity of the women's voices never privileges any one experience or position. The images that accompany the testimonials are made up of fragmentary reenactments of one woman's discovery of her pregnancy through to and after her abortion. By grounding the body in many experiences, the film thwarts any unitary consolidation of female identity; by grounding the voices in one body, the film consolidates a feminist politic around gender oppression.

An analogous heterogeneity informs Gwendolyn's *Prowling By Night* (1990), a film made with the participation of several prostitutes and one stripper about police harassment. While different voices recount experiences of 'lawful' persecutions on the soundtrack, drawings made by the women are animated through lighting and camera movement. Framed as reenacted conversations between prostitutes on the street, the voices and the drawings constitute a rhetorical blend of personal and factual information. Aligned with her earlier work producing women's pornography, Gwendolyn challenges a history of over determined imagery by having the prostitutes represent themselves. Relegating photographic objectification to the animated police car (which is constantly interrupting the women), she turns the empiricism of state surveillance around and in the process constructs a highly disturbing document that demands social change.

Similarly impressive is the fashioning of non-empirical epistemologies in recent biographical and autobiographical films by women. Their various hybrid forms often combine documentary and narrative with experimental techniques to suggest a subjective authorial presence which problematizes discourses of self. Many of them manage to simultaneously specify and confound an identity politic through complex formal and thematic juxtapositions. For instance, this is seen in Brenda Longfellow's exploration of the two Marylins

(Monroe and Bell) in *Our Marilyn* (1987); Marion McMahon's examination of two forms of labour (marriage and nursing) in *Nursing History* (1989); the two accidents (abroad and at home) in *You Take Care Now*; Mangaard's juxtaposition of two women artists (Spring Hurlbut and Judith Schwartz) in *Dialogue on Vision* (1990); two women recalling Hiroshima in *Clouds* (1985) by Scott Haynes and Fumiko Kiyooka; and Sally Lee's immersion into *The World of Suzie Wong* in Helen Lee's comical *Sally's Beauty Spot* (1990). While foregrounding the singularities of women's lived experiences, many of these films depend on exchanges between women, between geographies and cultures. Importantly, the intersubjective positions and cinematic pleasures they construct are directed towards women. Kathy Daymond's "docu-porn" *Nice Girls Don't Do It* (1990) brings this to the fore by providing an explicit step by step 'how to' for women who want to experience female ejaculation.

THE TENSION between formalism and activism underlying a history of women's cinema, as Teresa de Lauretis asserts, has produced a heterogeneity that aims at expanding and creating new communities of women.<sup>9</sup> The political solidarity of women depends on the mutual recognition of our differences and our different needs. To this end, there is no one site of resistance, no one style or point of view that defines feminist intervention.

While the critique of realism that evolved out of psychoanalytic feminism in the mid-1970s was an essential step in confronting the oppressiveness of prevailing forms of narration and representation, it has all too often led to a static over-estimation of the subversive effects of non-realist forms. The commodification of everything 'new' in corporate culture has deflated the opposition to realist forms that fuelled earlier avant-gardes. Feminists have responded to the expansionist mandates of capitalist culture by penetrating all areas of filmmaking. Several have directed their efforts towards excavating, as Brecht had put it, the *bad old pleasures* of narrative film in order to access larger audiences. Many others continue to produce work in super 8 and 8mm film as well as video, using inexpensive technologies and smaller exhibition venues to defy the ever growing pressures and controls of a state funded culture.

So if feminist avant-garde films are no longer to be found in one place or under one aesthetic banner, it is not because the avant-garde is dead (although the Avant-Garde *is*). It is not because the feminist movement has been crippled by fragmentation (although dominant ideologies would have us believe it). It is because the feminist struggle to locate new meanings (the founding principle for the alliance between a feminist and an avant-garde *politic*), the need to form coalitions across many sites and the corresponding urgency to construct a plurality of women's histories and imagings to expand our participation in the public sphere, to expand the very definition of the public sphere is clearly underway.

8. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p.35.

9. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.135.

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NELL SHIPMAN

## Dog and Woman, Together at Last

ANIMALS IN THE FILMS OF NELL SHIPMAN

*by Kay Armatage*

### ZOO-LOGY

Nell Shipman had become involved with animals early on in her film career, when as a junior star at Vitagraph she had seen a bobcat given electric shocks to make it snarl, and then doped so it would lie still. She had watched the animal die. She had also been outraged by the piano wire 'Running-W' — the mechanism that tripped horses by attaching wire to a foreleg.<sup>1</sup> In her autobiography she wrote: "My first reaction on seeing the dead bobcat, killed in making a Vitagraph picture, was grief. I cried over the limp furpiece, the lidded tawny eyes, the stub tail stilled, the semaphore ears no longer tuned to signals. Then my determination to do something for their cause was born. I knew it would be a small beginning; but, if I could show these animals on the screen doing their stuff freely, uncaged, unafraid, then a step would be taken, a smidgen of communication established between fellow creatures."<sup>2</sup> She had seen, after the SPCA had stepped in, the training of horses and dogs for films, but wild animals were still badly treated. She made up her mind then to get her "own wild animal cast and make actors of them without the use of whips, shouted commands, [or] charged wires poked

into them."<sup>3</sup> Shipman had become known early on for her zoo of wild animals, including the famous Brownie the bear as well as deer, elks, coyotes, wolves, a cougar, two wildcats, and assorted raccoons, skunks, eagles, owls, porcupines, beavers, marmots, muskrats, rabbits, dogs and cats. A map of Lionhead Lodge, the Shipman establishment at the tip of Priest Lake, indicates the prominence of the ten animal buildings, not counting eight malamute houses and a beaver dam.<sup>4</sup> Nearly all of Shipman's films featured animals in prominent roles, functioning as romantic agent, comic relief, victim or hero.

### GENRE

Shipman's work with animals and the natural settings of her films were amongst their chief commercial features. Wilderness and adventure stories had topped the literary bestseller lists since the early teens, with Zane Grey and Jack London the leading exponents of the form. T.E. Harre's *The Eternal Maiden* was notable in 1913, combining a tale of heroic feminine virtue with an "Esquimaux" setting.<sup>5</sup> Novels of the



## Do You Want a Different Film? Never was there one like this

The extraordinary story of Dolores, the swimming girl of the Canadian wilds, and Wapi, the Killer, who fights a whole dog team to save her life and a great bear which protects her from a man more brutal than the beasts, when she comes dripping from a roaring mountain stream.



A First National Special Attraction

Advertisement for *Back to God's Country* by Nell Shipman

Canadian woods took off in popularity around 1914, with authors such as Ralph Connor, Harold Bindloss, H. Footner, Virgie Roe, B.W. Sinclair and Alice Jones among the top sellers. In 1914 James Oliver Curwood's *Kazan*, a story of an escaped sled-dog who returns to his own kind<sup>6</sup> was worth noting, followed in 1915 by his *God's Country and the Woman*, mentioned as a "lively melodrama of the Canadian Northwest."<sup>7</sup> By 1917, novels of contemporary everyday life or of exotic romance were the two main literary pulls on the public purse, though "the novel of adventure or mystery,... [and the] story of the great outdoors still [made] up a considerable part of the year's fiction."<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the war, James Oliver Curwood (1878-1927) had achieved a short-lived position alongside Zane Grey and Jack London as the best-selling authors of wilderness adventure, although it is notable that the wilds of the Canadian Northwest were now seen as a "commonplace" setting for popular fiction.<sup>9</sup> Many of Curwood's novels were made into films, including *God's Country and the Woman* (1915), *Barce*, *Son of Kazan* (1918), *Back to God's Country* (1919), and *The Golden Snare* (1921). All but the last starred Nell Shipman.

Although amongst film genres, westerns were always reliable as the most popular genre, nevertheless both dog stories, dating from *Rescued by Rover* (1903), and adventure films had been staples of the distribution syndicates.

Shipman's earliest successes as a star had been in films based on Curwood's novels or short stories. Curwood had had modest success with the wilderness and local colour adventure novels which dominated popular fiction in the first decades of the 20th century, but with the publication of *Kazan*

1. Nell Shipman, *The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart* (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 1987) p.i

2. *ibid.*, p.ii

3. *ibid.*, p.i

4. *ibid.* 5. Edward Everett Hale, *The American Year Book: Literature and Language Bibliographies from the American Year Book, 1910-1919*, p.71.

6. *ibid.*, p.91

7. *ibid.*, p.111

8. *ibid.*, p.135

9. *ibid.*, p.197



Nell Shipman

(1915), a story of a wolf dog in the Canadian Far North, his fame had begun to rival that of Jack London's *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild*. *God's Country and the Woman*, a story of a "love so deep and confident in the breast of the hero that it pierced the curtain of apparent unworthiness in which the heroine had felt it necessary to cloak her own actions," enjoyed great sales the same year and was made into a film which began the partnership between Shipman and Curwood, and which would label Nell forever as "the girl from God's country." In 1917 Curwood returned to the animal kingdom with *The Grizzly King* and *Baree, Son of Kazan*, the latter of which again starred Nell Shipman in the film version. With Curwood, Nell Shipman had come to a production partnership based not only on material success, but also buttressed by a spiritual connection around their philosophies about animals.

#### ZOO-OSOPHY

In the preface to *Baree, Son of Kazan* Curwood articulates the philosophy which could also describe Shipman's:

I have come to believe that if boys and girls and men and women could be brought into the homes and lives of wild birds and animals as their homes are made and their lives are lived we would all understand at last that wherever a

heart beats it is very much like our own in the final analysis of things... And in my books it is my desire to tell of the lives of the wild things which I know as they are actually lived. It is not my desire to humanize them. If we are to love wild animals so much that we do not want to kill them we *must know them as they actually live*. And in their lives, in the facts of their lives, there is so much of real and honest romance and tragedy, so much that makes them akin to ourselves that the animal biographer need not step aside from the paths of actuality to hold one's interest.<sup>10</sup>

Curwood was a Michigan boy, but his favourite place was Canada, which he called "God's Country," the setting for all his books:

The vast wilderness of the Peace River country, the mountains of the westward, the great reaches of the Athabaska and the Mackenzie, the solitary arctic plains, and the uninhabited forests about Hudson Bay became the ruling passion of my life, which I determined to put into my books so deathlessly that for many years to come all might read them and learn to love the scenes where my heroes and heroines lived.<sup>11</sup>

Margaret Atwood's 1972 study of Canadian literature, *Survival*, suggests that the genre of realistic wild animal stories is a Canadian invention, dating from Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*. Atwood sees this genre as the lynchpin to understanding the Canadian psyche. She compares the Canadian treatment of animals in fiction with British and American models. Citing Kipling's *Mowgli* stories, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and Beatrix Potter, Atwood argues that the British anthropomorphize animals as simply Englishmen in furry zippered suits. She contrasts the British with American literary animals, which are generally the object of the heroic quest with the interest squarely on the hunter. She refers to the white whale in *Moby Dick*, the bear in Faulkner's "The Bear," the lion in Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," and the grizzlies in Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam* — animals endowed with magic symbolic qualities:

They are Nature, mystery, challenge, otherness, what lies beyond the frontier: the hunter wishes to match himself against them, conquer them by killing them and assimilate their magic qualities, including their energy, violence and wildness, thus "winning" over Nature and enhancing his own stature. American animal stories are quest stories — with the Holy Grail being a death — usually successful from the hunter's point of view, though not from the animal's; as such they are a comment on the general imperialism of the American cast of mind. When Americans have produced stories which superficially resemble those of Seton and Roberts, they are likely to be animal success-stories, the success being measured in terms of the animal's adjustment to people — as in Jack London's *White Fang*, where the wolf-dog, mistreated in youth, begins by hating men but ends up loving them, saving them and living in California.<sup>12</sup>



Conversely, Atwood sees Canadian animal stories as not only being told from the animal's point of view in a realistic fashion, but being essentially tragic tales of cruel and senseless death, with the animal as victim.

### IN A DOG'S OWN VOICE

While Atwood's book is essentially a thematic study and has many methodological and theoretical problems, it is, nevertheless, a staple of our Canadian attempt at self-understanding. The book also deals only with mainstream literature, and omits the great tradition of sentimental and popular animal literature in Canada, a genre wildly successful ever since the publication of Margaret Marshall Saunders' *Beautiful Joe* in 1893. The first North American million-seller, *Beautiful Joe* went through many editions and was read by every Canadian and perhaps every North American child at least through the 1950s, when I wept copiously into its pages. Significantly, *Beautiful Joe* was an "autobiography" of a dog, presenting life from the dog's point of view and in its voice.

Curwood's animal stories, without giving voice to animals, also fall squarely into the sentimental genre of animal adventure in which animals and humans meet in mutual friendship. Curwood describes the real-life Kazan, whom he found as a killer about to be shot by his owner:

Kazan, the bad dog, the half-wolf, the killer — was the best four-legged friend I ever had. And Kazan was the father of Baree: Grey Wolf, the full-blooded wolf was his mother. Nepee, the Willow, [Nell's part in the film] still lives near God's lake; and it was in the country of Nepee and her father that for three lazy months I watched the doings at Beaver Town, and went on fishing trips with Wakayoo, the bear... Wakayoo, Baree's big bear friend is dead. He was killed as I have described, in that 'pocket' among the ridges, while I was on a jaunt to Beaver Town. We were becoming good friends and I missed him a great deal.<sup>13</sup>

### THE BEAR, THE BOY, AND THE DOG

Nell Shipman, a Canadian who lived out her career in the U.S., disguising its wilderness landscape as a Canadian paradise, espoused a philosophy similar to Curwood's. She referred to animals as "small wild people" and saw them as fellow creatures.

Shipman usually starred in the films with her pets, but in *The Bear, The Boy, and The Dog* (1921, 20 minutes) she appears only as an extra, wearing a large hat shielding her face and sitting with her back to the camera. In contrast with the framing device of *Something New* (1920), which situates her as writer/enunciator of the tall tale, sitting at her typewriter and smiling conspiratorially into the camera, her presence/absence in *The Bear, The Boy, and The Dog* could be seen as a disavowal. But I would prefer to read it instead as a modest act of generosity, giving the eponymous trio their rightful status as stars, not to be outdone by the more famous face of their human director. They are the only featured players, and as the title indicates the equal weight of the three characters

in the film. And 'characters' they are: both the dog and the bear are autonomous subjects in the narrative, capable of a range of emotional responses, hermeneutic analysis and the formulation of strategy. This seems to be an essential Shipman authorial note: that the animals act on their own, apparently without instructions or orders from human masters. Shipman even attributes thoughts to them through intertitles. Here, for example, the bear's sad reflection on this state comes close to poetry: "And this on a September day with the wind whispering in the wildwood, he sighs from his cage in the zoo."

The film begins with the introduction of the three characters, each confined on a beautiful September Saturday: the boy by his chores, the dog left tied under a tree as his mistress drives off, and Brownie the bear, in "the saddest prison of all," the zoo. Brownie's cage door is inadvertently left open so that he escapes just as the dog is barking (in intertitles) "I want my liberty" and the boy decides to go on strike. As the dog wriggles its head through its tight collar, the intertitle takes the dog's voice: "If you scrooge back your ears this doesn't hurt...much."

A two-reel adventure ensues in which Brownie raids the boy's house and eventually meets up with the boy and the dog who have left for an adventure in the woods. The meat of the tale is the friendship that develops among the trio, eventually culminating in a sentimental tableau of the three of them, all entwined together, sleeping in the woods. Of course the burglars/villains are apprehended through their efforts and all seems right in movieland until practicality overcomes sentiment in the end, when the poor gentle bear is sent back to the zoo. The film contains a wonderful surprising moment when Brownie chases the boy up a tree and runs right over him. The stunt was not in the original script, according to cinematographer Joseph B. Walker (*The Light on Her Face*, Hollywood: ASC Press, 1984), but Shipman was so taken with its liveliness and naturalness that she rewrote the script on the spot to accommodate it.

There is nothing particularly remarkable about this charming little two-reeler. Nell Shipman turned out dozens of them, and this is one that was preserved by accident in excellent print condition. It belongs to a tradition of dog films that is as long as the cinema itself, beginning with *Rescued by Rover* (1903) and including Alice Guy Blache's *The Detective's Dog* (1912) as well as the many Lassies and Rin Tin Tin films of later decades, not to mention the dreaded Disneys. Shipman's films are notable, however, for their light touch with the intertitles which reveal the animals' thoughts without attempting any "Mr. Ed" sort of representations of speech. *The Bear, The Boy, and The Dog* is a cornerstone for understanding an aesthetic sensibility in which the enunciation of authorial identity explicitly connects nature and the animal world with feminine heroism.

10. James Oliver Curwood, *Baree, Son of Kazan* (New York: Doubleday, Pages & Co., 1917) pp. vi-vii.

11. James Oliver Curwood, *Son of the Forests* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1930) p. 201.

12. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto, Anansi Press, 1972) pp. 69-70.

13. James Oliver Curwood, *Baree, Son of Kazan* pp. vii-viii.



### THE TRAIL OF THE NORTH WIND

This same loving and humorous understanding is evidenced as well in virtually all of Shipman's other extant films. In *Trail of the North Wind* (1923) a malamute named Nugget (played by a malamute named Tex) saves the day in another heroic display of animal subjectivity. He demonstrates first his determination and skill by wriggling free from his sled-dog harness, and goes on to track the missing Dreena and Billy (played by Shipman and son Barry) as they stumble through the snow-bound wilderness. When he finds them, he sets them up in a little snow shelter until he can rouse two woodcutters to their rescue. As in *The Bear*, *The Boy*, and *The Dog*, a similar insouciant subjectivity informs the intertitles: as Nugget/Tex approaches the men and runs away and returns a couple of times — his intentions signalled to the spectator by a quick cross-fade to Dreena and Billy in their snowy lair — while the woodsmen stand there looking dumb, Tex barks (in intertitles) "Come this way! Can't you understand dog-english?"

### INTER-SPECIES COMMUNICATION

*Trail of the North Wind* hinges around communication with animals of all kinds. Dreena the heroine is identified first as the "story-girl" because she listens to the tales of the creatures of the wild and translates them for people; the film opens with a montage of alternating comic and lyric wilderness scenes with dogs, ducks, donkeys and baby skunks. Such montages and tableaux exhibiting the tame animals and Shipman's communication with them are trademarks of her films as well. William K. Everson complains of *The Grub Stake* (1923) that "Midway through the film, its narrative comes to a virtual halt when Shipman's character discovers a Disneyesque hidden valley, shares a cave with a bear, and communes with nature and wild animals for a reel or two."<sup>14</sup> Rather than the narrative coming to a virtual halt, I would argue on the contrary that the plots of Shipman's films are very often devices constructed precisely to afford such moments of intransitive display. The impetus for the plot of *Trail of the North Wind* — a simple tale of wilderness travail — is grandpa getting caught in a trap, so the exhibition of inter-species connection is thematically central. What hurts the animal also hurts the human, and it is clear that sympathetic communication and respect would prevent all such injuries. The moral of the story is told with a smile as Dreena/Nell sends the trap to a watery grave, never to be used on animal or human again.

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF CANINE SUBJECTIVITY

*Back to God's Country* (1919), for many years the only feature film of Shipman's that was known, includes the most excessive of all the displays of human/animal communication. In an early scene, Dolores (played by Shipman) lolls about in erotic play with Brownie the bear, nuzzling his snout and tweaking his ears, as skunks, squirrels, raccoons and baby foxes cavort about her. This is the epitome of life in God's country, representing a paradisaical vision of inter-species love and harmony — with matching log cabin.

*Back to God's Country* is at core a dog story, however, based on James Oliver Curwood's *Good Housekeeping* short story "Wapi the Walrus" (collected in *The Golden Book of Dog Stories*, ed. Era Zistel — no longer in print). In contrast to the relatively domestic achievements of the dogs in *The Bear*, *The Boy and The Dog* and *Trail of the North Wind*, *Back to God's Country* presents the dog Wapi (played by matching mastiffs Tresore and brother Rex) in a much more heroic mode. A variation on the bad dog story, Wapi is touched by the woman who intervenes as he is being whipped by his cruel master, and when the time comes for the inevitable chase and rescue, Wapi is at Dolores' side, turning his former viciousness into heroism as he slays the villain's sled-dogs so that Dolores can escape with her invalid husband.

Wapi is given a heroic genealogy in the prologue to the film. Wapi's ancestor, the Great Dane Tao, is introduced sitting quietly, gently blinking his eyes, in the first medium close-up of the film. Tao has come at the side of his master, a Chinese man drawn to the North "by the lure of Gold." White racism rules the day, however, for "the yellow man" is first insulted and then killed, and the huge dog is taken. The line that descends from Tao is cruelly mistreated by the barbaric white men who have conquered the "savage wilderness" and Wapi the Killer is the result, forty dog generations later. The extreme close-up that introduces Wapi the Killer contrasts tellingly with the introduction of gentle Tao, for Wapi foams at the mouth as he snarls and hurls himself at the camera, in a very dynamic series of shots.

### EXTRA-SENSORY INTER-SPECIES COMMUNICATION

From the outset of the film, Wapi is a featured player in the events. His presence and consciousness are interlaced particularly throughout the intricately intercut dramatic scenes leading up to the climax, in which he is instrumental. As uncanny extra-sensory communication materialises between Wapi and Dolores. Before they ever meet, there is a cut from Dolores on ship to Wapi at the trading post, followed by the title, "Like a great winged-bird the Flying Moon [the ship] brings to Wapi a strange and thrilling message from the white man's world of his forefathers." This intertitle is followed by a close-up of Wapi in vicious killer mode. Again in the scene where the villain is trying to get his way with Dolores on ship, her plight is intercut equally with shots of Wapi far away across the ice on land and shots of Nell's helpless husband lying injured in his bed in the next cabin. Wapi, like her husband, sense Dolores' plight. And this is all before they meet.

The first meeting between woman and dog is instrumental in the construction of canine subjectivity and the delineation of inter-species inter-subjectivity. Dolores has decided to take matters into her own hands, and strikes out across the ice and snow to seek help at the Trading Post, never suspecting that the Post is run by a man in cahoots with the villainous ship captain plotting her seduction and her husband's death. Cut to Wapi snarling viciously in close-up, fighting with other dogs. Blake, his owner, takes a whip to Wapi just as Nell approaches. Without hesitation she flings herself between the whip and the dog, as Blake warns "Look out! That dog is a





*The Grub Stake* by Nell Shipman, Priest Lake Idaho, 1922

devil..." But as he speaks, the killer dog miraculously becomes quiet, as the intertitle comments "A new miracle of understanding, roused by the touch of a woman's hand." Whereas the model of femininity exhibited in the other films demonstrated that remarkable communication as idiosyncratically symptomatic, in *Back to God's Country* the connection between femininity and inter-species understanding is made explicit and shown to be essential to the nature of femininity.

#### **FEMININITY, INTER-SPECIES COMMUNICATION, AND FEMININE DESIRE**

In her autobiography, Shipman offers a down-to-earth, pragmatic analysis of her first encounter with Brownie the Bear:

Big Brownie was my first wild animal encounter on camera unattended by Keepers, guns, wire, whips or cages. At Vitagraph I'd handled sled-dogs but now I was acting with a free, large bear who might bite, hug or merely swat. She reared, put an arm about my waist, drew me close, gave me a tentative sniff, then licked my cheek, pushed me gently aside and dropped to the ground at my feet. While I relaxed in her embrace I knew my theory was okay, and that it was a fifty-fifty deal between human and animals. Had there been a seedling of fear in me I would have felt it sprout, recognized alarm or at least a faint quiver of concern. It could lie in the deepest, darkest thought-cell but would communicate. It simply was not there. All about us and within us was serene, untroubled, unquestioned. No personal bravery in this, just a fact of communication.<sup>15</sup>

In *Back to God's Country*, the mutuality of the connection between the dog and the woman is underlined by a scene depicting the dog remembering or desiring: a shot of Wapi

chained to a stake dissolves — signifying his thoughts — to a matching shot of Dolores at the dog's side, embracing him. That memory or wish triggers the dog's action, for he breaks his chains and follows Dolores' scent to the ship. The scene closed with an iris in on the woman embracing the dog and kissing him on the face.

This kiss signals the transformation of Wapi's status in the film. From this point in the tale, Wapi takes the position of an heroic lover, assuming the traditional function of the human male protagonist. As the chase begins, a title indicates that Wapi's "hour of destiny is at hand." Close-ups of Wapi are intercut with shots of Dolores worrying and the villain approaching in this high-speed chase by dog-sled — a scene rivalled in its quintessential Canadianness only by the canoe chase in Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore* (1975). A title pierces the dog's consciousness: "Sensing the swift approaching menace of the men he hates." A few minutes later, a still photo of Wapi in close-up forms the uncharacteristic background to the generic title "Her Last Hope," dramatically marrying signifier and signified in one card embodying the relation of feminine desire to the animal subject. Finally Wapi rises to the challenge, runs off to attack the approaching dogs pulling the villain's sled, and the title intones: "Fighting at last the greatest of all his fights — for a Woman."

This rather complex relay of inter-species desire, it must be recalled, is the creation of the woman screenwriter and star. The dog, then, in the expression of its desire, must be seen as the representation of the excessive desire of femininity, a transgressive desire which exceeds the capacity for satisfaction through relations with the woman's human lover/hus-

14. William K. Everson, "Rediscovery" *Films in Review*, April 1989, p.231

15. Shipman, op.cit. p.80



band. Such excess of feminine desire is made explicit in the denouement. With hubby safely tucked into bed at Fort Confidence, Dolores kisses Wapi in close-up, and the scene ends with a sweet iris in and fade to black. Dog and Woman — together at last.

### **PATRIARCHY: A SEX-SPECIFIC AND SPECIES-SPECIFIC HIERARCHY**

But not for long. For such taboo moments of inter-species love and the free rein of excessive feminine desire cannot be contained within even the most sentimental and romantically adventurous narrative. The old dream of the wilderness paradise, squirrels and raccoons frolicking while baby foxes play and newborn birds chirp in their nests, gives way to a new, somewhat more traditionally hierarchical vision of the human male and female engaged in culture-specific conversation, sitting at a species-specific table. A cut to the hearth-side reveals a cheerfully kicking human baby, and at its side lies the huge Great Dane, formerly Wapi the Killer and Wapi the Heroic Lover, now Wapi the Nursemaid.

It's disappointing, isn't it? After *Back to God's Country*, which Shipman adapted from Curwood's screenplay, their partnership, begun with such high hopes and mutually exclusive contracts, was immediately dissolved. Speculation has tended to emphasize Curwood's anger over the heroic role given to the woman protagonist in Shipman's screenplay, for in his short story the dog was unrivalled as heroic protagonist. Other guesses noted Curwood's displeasure that Shipman refused to allow her magnificent mane of dark curly hair to be let loose in the film, and one could easily speculate that both husband Shipman and partner Curwood (both of them just over forty years old, to Nell's luscious twenty-seven years) were both consumed with jealousy when during the shoot she flaunted her affair with the dashing young Production Manager. On the other hand, however, one might guess that Curwood was ashamed and disappointed at the screenplay's ignominious end for the mighty macho Wapi. Can't blame him really. There must also be, amongst the women of the audience, a similar disappointment at the fate of heroic femininity: excessive and transgressive in her desire, replete in her enunciative control, she is in the end firmly in the grip of the patriarchal domestic imperative.

### **DENOUEMENT: THE ZOO**

By 1925, the dashing Production Manager Bert Van Tuyle was gone, Shipman Productions was bankrupt, and the landlord sent the bailiff to seize the animals. There were reports that some of the animals were starving and showed signs of maltreatment, though Barry Shipman denied that any animals starved at Lionhead. Shipman owed \$795 to her landlord Sam Byars, who sought retribution by seeking a court-ordered auction of 100 animals — "the first time," according to the *Spokesman-Review*, "that a wild animal zoo was ever offered on the auction block on court orders." Nell, now in New

York, succeeded in blocking the auction, and her wildlife collection was eventually consigned to the San Diego Zoo. *The Priest River Times* (18 June 1925) noted that "about 40 animals and birds" were sent south, including "dogs, bears, deer, wildcat, wolves, skunk, eagle, rats, possum, coon, and other small animals." Brownie the bear was in this shipment. Tresore, who had played the heroic Wapi, had been poisoned the year before. Nell suspected the wicked landlord as the murderer.<sup>16</sup>

At 33, Nell Shipman's career as producer, director, star, and animal wrangler was over. Another marriage, several more lovers, the birth of twins, and a long career as a writer were still to come. Her most notable screenplay was *Wings in the Dark*, a Paramount production starring Myrna Loy and Cary Grant, directed by James Flood and released in 1935. *Fortune* magazine noted it as the first film about a Seeing Eye dog.<sup>17</sup> In her old age, long after her company had gone bankrupt and her wild animals were dispersed, countless numbers of dogs and cats lived with her in her house. She never found another Tresore.

### **NELL SHIPMAN'S KNOWN WORKS**

*The Ball of Yarn* (scen./star, 1910); *Outwitted by Billy* (scen., Selig Polyscope Co., 1913); *Under the Crescent* (scen. & star, 6 two-reel episodes, Universal, 1915); *Under the Crescent* (novel, publ. Grosset & Dunlap, 1915); *God's Country and the Woman* (from James Oliver Curwood's short story, co-dir./co-scen., star, 1917); *Baree, Son of Kazan* (from Curwood story, co-dir./co-scen., star, 1917); *Back to God's Country* (dir. David M. Hartford, scen. Nell Shipman, prod. Ernest Shipman, starring Nell Shipman, Canadian Photoplays Production, 1919); *Something New* (scen./co-dir., star, 1920); *The Girl From God's Country* (prod./scen./co-dir., star, Nell Shipman Productions, 1921); *The Bear, The Boy and the Dog* (prod./dir./scen., star, Nell Shipman Productions, 1921); *The Grub Stake* (prod./co-dir./scen., star, Nell Shipman Productions, 1923); *Trail of the North Wind* (prod./dir./scen./star, Nell Shipman Productions, 1923); *Light on Lookout* (prod./dir./scen./star, Nell Shipman Productions, 1923); *The Golden Yukon* (co-dir./scen., star, Sierra Pictures, 1927); *Wings in the Dark* (scen. Nell Shipman, dir. James Flood, stars Myrna Loy & Cary Grant, Paramount, 1935).

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16. Shipman, pp.182-3.

17. *ibid.*, p.184.



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# Boys, Girls and *Switch*

ON THE POLICING OF SEX AND GENDER

by Ki Namaste

Blake Edwards' recent film *Switch* self-consciously plays with gender, sex and sexuality. As a commentary on the social construction of gender as well as sex, it is brimming with subversive potential. Unfortunately, *Switch* regularly falls short of reaching this potential, and in fact serves to entrench the categories of "man," "woman," "male," and "female" as the trans-historical, transcultural entities with which Edwards is apparently playing.

*Switch* has a relatively simple plot. It revolves around Steve, the main character, who is notorious for his machismo and sexist treatment of women. In one of the opening scenes three of his ex-girlfriends invite him to a "private party," with the intention of killing him. In spite of his misogyny (or, more frighteningly, perhaps because of it), the audience with whom I screened the film had at least a partial identification with Steve and his macho-bravado attitude. While Steve is being drowned, the cheers in the theatre were most notably absent from "the general population," and most audible from the feminists and progressives.

Such incidents quickly led me to the conclusion that *Switch*, a movie centred around questions of gender identity, is open to various readings and interpretations depending on

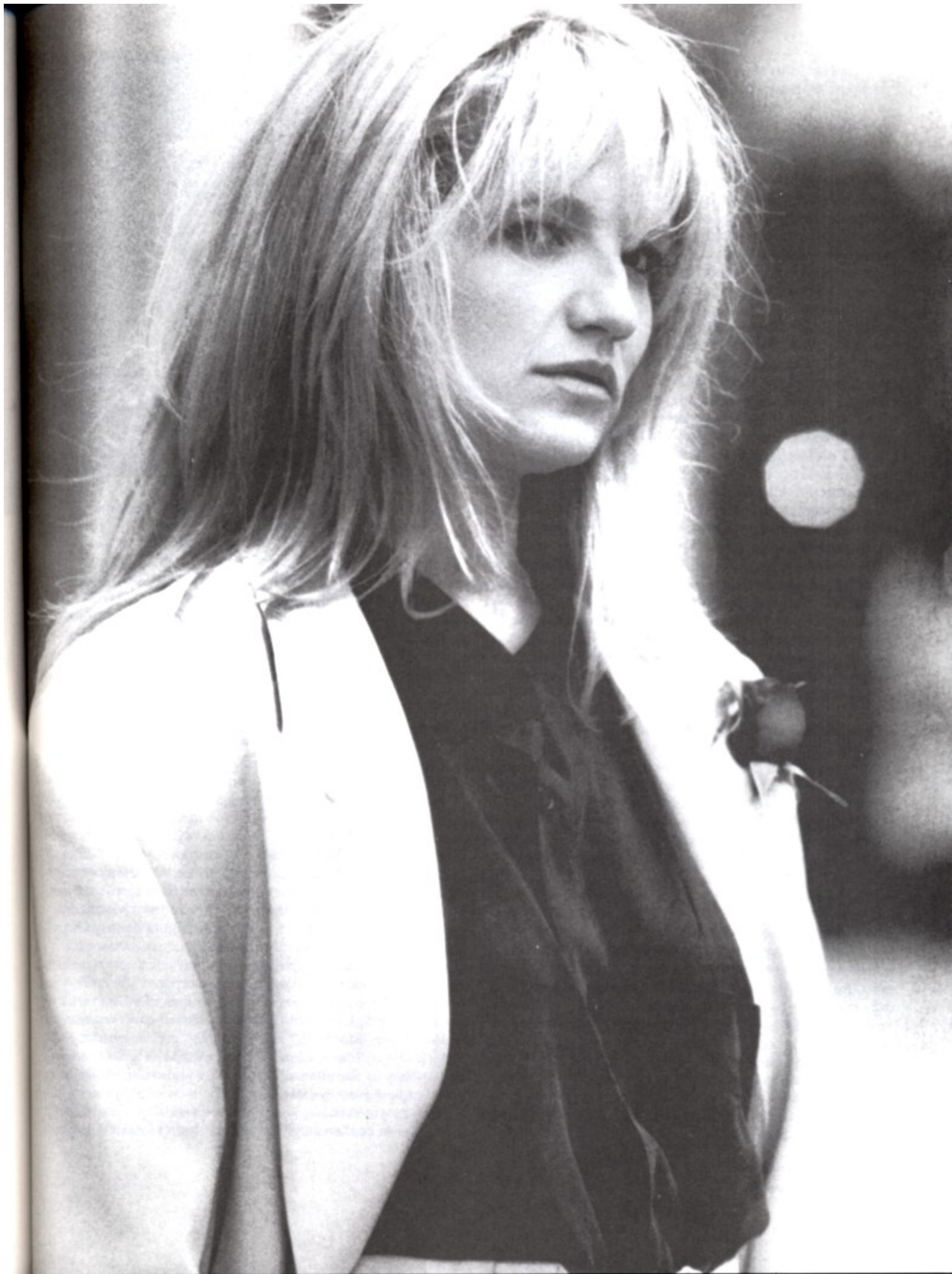
the (con)textual position of the reader/viewer. This is an important issue in theorizing the kind of issues *Switch* addresses, and is a point to which I will shortly return.

To continue with the plot, Steve dies and is in limbo at the gates of heaven. God, who most interestingly has both a male and a female voice, greets Steve and informs him that heaven is as of yet undecided as to whether or not he should gain entrance. On the one hand, he has been an upstanding member of the community, while on the other he has been a misogynous jerk. While Steve pleads that he is, in fact, worthy of entrance, God sets out a test for him. Steve is to return to earth and find one woman who honestly feels that Steve is a good person. Enter the devil, most definitely gendered as male. The devil is also vying for Steve's soul, and points out to God that with such a test, Steve will merely meet some naive women and lure her with his charms into believing that he is a good, honest man. This argument makes sense to God, and when asked what the devil suggests as a more appropriate test, we return to earth where Steve is no longer a man, but a woman.

Thus begins the central problematic of *Switch*. Gender, sex, identity, and the body are all fundamental issues in what is

Ellen Barkin in Blake Edwards' *Switch*





about to transpire through the rest of the movie. What I want to articulate, however, is that rather than freely playing with these categories, terms, and identities, *Switch* is representative of the ways in which Hollywood establishes the boundaries of play within and around gender, sex, sexuality, and the body. As such, *Switch* serves to cast the terms "man" and "woman," as well as their counterparts "male" and "female," into a fixed, transcendental signifying position against which all types, forms, and varieties of differences are established, measured, and discussed. Therein lies the violence of *Switch*, a violence bound up in denying difference, smashing pluralities, and constraining identities.

Upon Steve's return to earth, we are confronted with "Kate" (Ellen Barkin). In a most amusing scene, Kate discovers that she can no longer, in fact, pee standing up, and that her body is that of a woman. Due to Kate's violent reaction to this discovery, the audience is reassured that Kate, in fact, is really Steve. Perhaps more than any other mainstream cultural representation to date, we are thus presented with the classic case of "a man trapped in a woman's body."

What is most noteworthy about this presentation, however, is the acritical understanding and employment of the terms "man," "woman," and "body." Most especially, these terms exist, we are told, as accurate descriptions and representations of "reality." The comic relief results when these terms — as stabilized — are inversed, a process which serves to underline their signifying status and to ignore the ways in which these terms become inscribed and encoded culturally.

The mere reversal of the terms "man" and "woman" as provision for comedy is most apparent at the beginning of the movie, when Kate (who is really a man, we are constantly reminded) sits with her legs open, makes crass sexual comments about women, and doesn't know how to walk in high heels. The potential subversion implicit in such representations is immense: that Kate cannot walk in high heels suggests, for example, that "the female body" as such does not exist apart from its cultural inscription. Yet, and it is here that *Switch* regresses into a normative discourse, because there are no concurrent images of ("real") women who have trouble walking in high heels presented, we are to read Kate not so much as woman but as Steve, that is, a man. The problems involved in walking in high heeled shoes, then, can only be problematized (and, I would add, naturalized) in reference to men, maleness, and masculinity.



Blake Edwards' *Switch*

*Switch* appears to be offering us a play with gender, sex, and the body. But it does so with an understanding of gender as the cultural equivalent to sex as biology. As such, it cannot help but resubstantiate the equation between these two terms. As Judith Butler argues, we need to think about gender as one of the ways through which sexes and bodies are naturalized. Butler writes:

...gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.<sup>1</sup>

These theoretical and political implications are crucial to understanding *Switch* in particular, and the way Hollywood organizes play around gender, sex, and the body more generally. By taking terms of "man" and "woman" as *a priori*, and by only discussing these terms in opposition to one another (albeit in the context of play with gender and sex), *Switch* reifies the very terms of opposition it has set out to problematize. Rather than understanding these terms as themselves products of social relations and institutions, the film takes them as existing in and of themselves. "Man" and "woman" thus collapse into "male" and "female;" gender cannot be separated out from sex; and the body exists as an absolute, rather than as simultaneously marked and determinate of social meanings and social relations.

If there was ever any doubt in the viewer's mind as to the permanence of the categories "man" and "woman" in the



film, that doubt is quickly cast aside towards the end of the film. Kate has become pregnant, having slept with only one man one time. In delivering the baby, Kate dies and is once again at the gates of heaven. It is clear that she is going to be admitted entrance into heaven, and the most obvious reason for this is that she has fulfilled her function as women, i.e., borne a child. Women, the film sums up, exist only in relation to men and most especially to reproduce offspring. Interestingly, when Kate is at the gates of heaven, she is told by God (with both a male voice and a female voice) that she must make a choice as to whether she will be a male angel or a female angel. And it is here that *Switch* becomes most repressive, most disappointing, and most limiting. It is here that *Switch* forecloses the possibility of any readings of subversion. Kate is told she must choose between "male" and "female." She is told this, of course, by a being who is both male and female — someone with "the best of both worlds." As Kate muses over which sex/gender to choose, recognizing that there are positives and negatives to each, the viewer is left secure in the knowledge that the options "male" and "female" are the only choices here on earth, as well as in the afterworld. Indeed, the closing soundtrack of "Clouds" drives this point home even further with the lines "I've looked at life from both sides now...." *Switch* closes with a clear statement on the impossibility of having a sex and gender which do not correspond to Western cultural concepts. It speaks of the impossibility of inscribing a body beyond sex or gender, and the impossibility of breaking the sex-gender equation. And perhaps most importantly, *Switch* makes it clear that identity equals sex equals gender equals body. The containment of bodies, sexes, genders, and identities within the confines of a bipolar discourse thus closes off any sort of discussion of alternatives or interventions. In writing the rules of play around sex, gender, and bodies, *Switch* writes out the possibility of articulating difference on its own terms.

The element of play which *Switch* highlights throughout its narrative is a mere inversion of the terms "man" and "woman" — playing them off of each other so as to provide comic relief. At one level, the film is speaking to the audience and saying "Look at this person. They do not follow the sex/gender rules set out so clearly in our culture. They are thus appropriate objects of our ridicule." Such comic relief thus serves to reify the status and position of the terms of reference for difference (man/woman; male/female), and to ensure the (presumed heterosexual) viewer's superiority in the knowledge that their bodies, position, and identities — as appropriately heterosexist and gendered — are culturally sanctioned and therefore correct.

It is interesting that in 1991, Hollywood can present us with representations of gender inversion, with a play on the opposition of "man" and "woman" in relation to gender, sex, and bodies. What is perhaps more interesting, are the representations we do not see, especially through Hollywood and the mainstream film industry. Most particularly, we do not see anything which moves beyond a mere reversal of sex/gender rules and regulations. There are, for example, no images of people who are simultaneously "not-male" and "not-female." There are no images which seek to move beyond gender, beyond "androgyny," beyond sex, or beyond

the narrow terms of a bipolar discourse. As such, we have no mainstream representations of cultural interventions on question of sex, gender, and the body.

In consideration of what we do not see, as well as what is made explicit (that is, visible), we need to understand films like *Switch* as part of the cultural regulation of difference. Borrowing from Foucault, we need to be aware that cultural industries such as film do not merely repress or forbid difference around sex, gender, and bodies. Rather, they set the parameters within which such difference can be explored. Within the epistemological constraints established, questions of ontology are articulated only insofar as they resubstantialize the discourses and discursive structures of Sameness (i.e., the extent to which bodies, sexes, and/or genders are or are not male or female). Therein lies the challenge for cultural activists — to expose this (epistemological) regulation of (ontological) difference, and to set out to move beyond the narrow confines of such discourses and discursive settings.

Indeed, such activist work is crucial in the wake of legislation banning positive representations of difference around gender, sex, and sexuality — most notably the Helms Amendment in the USA and Section 28 in Britain. This is legislation which is not coincidentally employed first and foremost against gay and lesbian cultural representations and interventions. In tandem with the fight against such regressive and repressive legislation, we need to be fighting on our own terms as well, creating representations of intervention and difference for which the Right wing (or ourselves) have no labels.

Given the tremendous force industries like Hollywood exert on gender, sex, and the body, we need to fight to reclaim the territories and languages which have been so quietly and neatly ignored, hidden from our view. We need to understand that the regulation of difference as expressed in films like *Switch* is more powerful, more pervasive than any piece of legislation could ever hope to be. For in articulating differences of gender, sex and the body only insofar as they relate to the stabilized terms of "man" and "woman," *Switch* succeeds in presenting itself as liberating at the very same time as it is normative and programmatic.

The difficulty in decoding films like *Switch*, in articulating opposition to a cultural artifact which seems so liberating, lies in theorizing what we do and do not see. In theorizing gender, sex, and the body, we would do well to follow the words of Butler. She writes:

A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is to be successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, *Switch* remains a frame which polices, rather than liberates.

1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p.7

2. Butler, 1990, p.33

# TWIN PEAKS

MOUNTAINS OR MOLEHILLS?



by Christine Ramsay

Spelling out the aesthetic and ethical implications of *Twin Peaks* seems at first an impossible exercise. Like other critics I was initially fascinated with Lynch's form of play — his play with postmodern form. But, as Diana Hume George reports in "Lynching Women:" "It wasn't until about the third episode that I came out of my stupor of admiration for the wacko combination of irony, parody, and skillful manipulation long enough to wonder if I was being Lynched again, as I was with *Blue Velvet*. In the middle of an ironic giggle, the thought began to form itself: What am I laughing at?"<sup>1</sup> Certainly, I was caught in Lynch's whirlpool of donuts, demons, dreams and drool. I admired *Twin Peaks*, taped all the episodes, enjoyed it aesthetically as an



interesting relief from the usual programming offered on network television. But if, indeed, there is pleasure at the base of *Twin Peaks*, I realize with reflection that the important ethical question to ask in terms of feminist criticism is: what kind of and whose pleasure?

Asked by interviewer Steve Pond in *Us Magazine* to explain the appeal of the show, David Lynch replied "I think it's just, you know, capital F-U-N".<sup>2</sup> Spelling out *Twin Peaks*, for Lynch, is simple. *Twin Peaks* means "fun": sport, amusement, creative enjoyment. In the name of weekly television entertainment, *Twin Peaks* offers the visual pleasure of the violent death of Laura Palmer and the narrative pleasure of the search for its significance, its meaning, its cause. Working from the Lynch speller, the meaning is pure and simple: B-O-B as E-V-I-L incarnate. The violence of masculine desire represented in *Twin Peaks* masks, displaces and absolves itself through generalized evil. Yet it leaves its indelible mark by literally spelling itself out in code beneath its victims' fingernails. In *Vision and Difference* Griselda Pollock explores modernism in terms of gender and power relations to find that it has become part of "normal", everyday reality to see images of women's bodies as "the territory across which men artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde...".<sup>3</sup> Under the system of ethics and aesthetics that defines modernism, the bodies of women function as the silent sign of masculine sexuality, subjectivity, and power. As John Berger articulates this phenomenon in *Ways of Seeing*, a man's (subjective) presence suggests "what he is capable of doing to you or for you" while a woman's presence establishes her as an object of masculine desire and so expresses "what can and cannot be done to her."<sup>4</sup> This means that while modernism (as the historical playground of Western masculinity) has entrenched leisure, consumption, money and the spectacle together as a categorically male preserve,<sup>5</sup> it has simultaneously marked the bodies of women as the bait, target, object of the game.

But, investigation of the bodies of women marked by rape, murder, and B-O-B is clearly the aesthetic and ethical predilection that the "post" modernist and "avant-garde" *Twin Peaks* demonstrates as well. Given the rules, logic and license of modernism and postmodernism, then, for David Lynch it is all in "fun" that *Twin Peaks* works to "get us off," as George puts it, on "the sexually tortured, brutally murdered, mutilated body of an adolescent girl."<sup>6</sup> Obviously, for feminist criticism, the "meanings" of *Twin Peaks* cannot be left to be explained away by or lost to the fun and vagaries of Lynch's "creative genius." If we are to understand exactly what is going on in the Lynch funhouse, we must look for the ideology behind the irony, the power structures of masculine privilege beneath the parody. This involves analysis of the larger cultural environment and the specific artistic temperament from which *Twin Peaks* has emerged. I am most interested, here, in the connection between ethics (practices of normative behaviour) and aesthetics (practices of representation and reception) as that connection applies to questions of gender in *Twin Peaks*. Particularly interesting are the questions of incest, rape and murder of women. This essay will present a feminist investigation of *Twin Peaks* in terms of four broad categories of inquiry: the ethics and aesthetics of modernism and post-

modernism expressed through the grotesque as a key representational code; the television text and intertextuality; the masculine structure of popular narrative forms; and authorship.

## THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

*Twin Peaks* can be situated, ethically and aesthetically, under the rubric of both modernism and postmodernism. Modernism is understood, in its most general terms, as a late 19th and early 20th century experimental movement in art that is fundamentally adversarial to bourgeois culture and its sense of normality. As such, it is anti-positivistic, anti-representational, formalist and deconstructivist. Modernism presumes to reject all classical styles of representation (content, subjectivity, authorial voice, verisimilitude, realism) for the sake of the purity and autonomy of the work of art.<sup>7</sup> With its tone of ironic self-awareness, modernism signals fragmentation, introversion and crisis. But, according to Pollock, the one standard that the modernist movement significantly does not throw into crisis is sexual difference.<sup>8</sup> In her estimation it is the first principle that organizes the world and work of the "avant-garde" modernist. As we will see, it is the first principle for the "visionary" postmodernist as well.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is a late 20th century movement that proposes itself in terms of a sharp distinction from modernism and its insistence on privileging a notion of original, pure and autonomous aesthetic forms. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism emerges in a post-industrial society, a McLuhanesque global village, where communication networking and information processing are becoming the new productive centre.<sup>9</sup> In this new world of images, information consumption, and endless mechanical reproduction, there seems to exist only a perpetual present. With the past and the future seemingly effaced by technology, all we can do (ethically and aesthetically) is quote from an idealized past. Rooted in the insecurity and shallowness of a throw-away society, postmodernism is characterized by playfulness in all things; endless "F-U-N"; conspicuous consumption of nostal-

1. Diana Hume George, "Lynching Women." Ms. vol. 3 (Nov/Dec), 1990, p.58

2. Steve Pond, "Shades of Change." *Us: The Entertainment Magazine* n. 129, May, 1990, p.25

3. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.54

4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1970), p.46

5. Pollock, op.cit. p.52

6. George, op.cit. p.58

7. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other." in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Tania Modleski, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.197

8. Pollock, op.cit. p.56

9. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed. (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p.113



gia; ceaseless and self-conscious borrowing from and quotation of all historical styles; and conflation of art with popular culture.

David Lynch is generally lauded as the quintessential postmodernist — as a “creative genius whose inimitable surrealist style makes him the reigning leader of intellectual, avant-garde filmmaking.”<sup>10</sup> In Lynch’s oeuvre, bourgeois middle America’s “happy” past is self-consciously and self-reflexively referred to with the highly saturated ironic distance characteristic of the postmodern aesthetic. In “Postmodern Problematics” Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern representational practices are paradoxical — both inside and outside the dominant order they contest. Indeed, in Lynch, small-town, middle-class *Twin Peaks* and its denizens are revered and mocked at once. Without getting bogged down here in current debates over the legitimacy of postmodernism as a distinctly post-modern movement (obviously, I agree with Pollock that the sexist and misogynist underpinnings of modernism are rife in postmodernism as well), I will venture to say that the work of David Lynch clearly beds down in both camps. Using the techniques of modernism (i.e., surrealism, the grotesque) to “criticize” bourgeois values, he also uses the techniques of postmodernism (i.e., play, pastiche) to simultaneously parody and embrace bourgeois style. The ethical and aesthetic contradictions that emerge from this “creative” synthesis are legion. The common denominator to remember for our purposes, however, is Pollock’s insistence on the centrality of sexual difference to the meaning systems of patriarchal power, whatever the historical time-frame, labels, techniques and/or codes assigned to them.

Postmodern texts have available to them all the codes and conventions of representation, from high modernism to the soap opera. Perhaps postmodernism as applied to Lynch is best understood as a conversation with or reworking of the grotesqueries and surreal fantasies of modernism, which began essentially as a consciousness of form concerned with achieving a range of effects (from irony, parody and satire to the comical, the macabre, and the absurd). According to Philip Thomson in *The Grotesque*, the grotesque is primarily about conflict, “incompatible reactions,” and “incongruity” in the face of problematic human existence.<sup>11</sup> The tragic, deformed and disgusting make us uncomfortable. The grotesque can be seen as both a rationalization of and a defense mechanism against this discomfort: it points up the horror and nausea of existence, but makes this horror laughable at the same time. Appealing, then, to the sadistic side of human nature, the grotesque is rooted in the physically cruel, abnormal, obscene and monstrous made “impossibly comic.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, we cannot reconcile the horror and the mirth. The grotesque image in fact works to keep them in a state of perpetual conflict and tension.

Functionally the grotesque has two aspects, both of which are evident in *Twin Peaks*. First, it is used to express alienation, discomfort, dislocation and aggression, all of which, I would argue, are suffered by men like Lynch in the 1990s as various movements threaten the traditional forms of male power and pleasure. “It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies

and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation.”<sup>13</sup> Undeniably, Lynch’s work in particular can be read as a grotesque symptom of and backlash against the strife and disorientation that men have undergone in North American society in recent years under the pressure exerted, for instance, by feminism and gay rights. Second, the grotesque is a “structural principle” or pattern for dealing with the world.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as a game to be played by Lynch with the “unfathomable” absurdity of existence (F-U-N), as well as an attempt to exorcise strange and fearsome “demonic” elements from the environment (B-O-B), *Twin Peaks* again demonstrates clear affinities to the grotesque mode.

Further homologies can be drawn between the specific elements of the grotesque as defined by Thomson, Lynch’s aesthetic and ethical predilections, and the misogynist cultural underpinnings of which Pollock speaks. Disharmony and conflict are the premise of *Twin Peaks* as murder and evil spirits disrupt a sleepy rural American town. But the irresolvability of this conflict is then played out, significantly, on the backs of women through the disturbing tension between the comic and the horrible effected by the grotesque. For example, Leland Palmer’s behaviour after the murder of Maddy Ferguson is at once amusing (his playful song and dance routines) and patently alarming (his callous disposal of the body in his golf bag; his cocky celebration and near-exposure of the deed in front of agent Cooper on the golf-club road; his frightful transformations into the demoniacal Bob). Furthermore, grotesque extravagance, exaggeration and extremes make up the very fabric of the narrative (tables of donuts; Nadine’s inexplicable strength; the Log Lady and her premonitions; Cooper’s own telepathic powers). And mirth combined with horror as a defense mechanism against the physical abnormal are just as clearly in evidence (gentle giants; dancing dwarfs; one-eyed women; one-armed men; Leo’s paralysis). But how are we to read this grotesque display?

However obvious these aesthetic elements of the grotesque in *Twin Peaks*, the ethical elements of the grotesque are much more difficult (if not impossible) to find and identify. According to Thomson, the grotesque can have ethical or moral motives: it can be satirical and politically charged. Most often, though, the grotesque merely produces “a confusion of reaction” wherein the “grossest evil” and the ludicrously small-minded and amusing are inseparable.<sup>15</sup> Where the grotesque confuses incompatibles and usually stops there, the satiric organizes the world clearly enough to declare an ethics — to separate acceptable and unacceptable human behaviour. When satire conditions the grotesque, it targets the content of the grotesque and asks for an ethical response from the viewer; it asks, that is, for anger at the evil, not just for callous celebration of tension and ambivalence.

10. Laurie Ouellette, “Is David Lynch Creepier Than His Movies?” *Utne Reader* n.43, (Jan-Feb), 1991, p.14

11. Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen & Co., 1972, pp.3-5

12. *ibid.*, p.8

13. *ibid.*, p.11

14. *ibid.*, p.19

15. *ibid.*, p.42



For the grotesque to be potentially radical and critical, its form and content would both have to come together to ultimately produce satire and/or parody. Is Lynch satirical in *Twin Peaks*? Does he examine and judge the causes of the "evil" he represents in a radically new yet ethically responsible way? Certainly he raises the theme of incest and points to patriarchs Leland Palmer and Ben Horne (notably, the funeral scene where Leland sprawls across Laura's coffin and rides it in metaphorical intercourse; the near-rape of Audrey by Ben Horne at One-Eyed Jack's). But Lynch just as easily lets the guilty patriarchs escape responsibility/blame/public conviction according to the ethics, values and laws of both the middle class world of hero Dale Cooper and the "politically correct" world of the "radically hip" audience he targets. In Audrey Horne's "confrontation" with her father about his near-rape of her at One-Eyed Jack's, the character is never allowed to fully express the disgust, anger and rage we would assume she suffers. The issue is neatly dropped. Audrey becomes her father's Girl Friday/successor and will dutifully nurse him through his impending breakdown. And Leland's guilt in the rape-murder of Laura, as we have already seen, is displaced onto Bob and absolved. Laura Palmer is raped and murdered, it turns out, not by the patriarchy symbolized by her father Leland, and identified by Laura as such to agent Cooper in his dream, but by E-V-I-L. Thus, the political reality of I-N-C-E-S-T that *Twin Peaks* ostensibly raises is side-stepped: Leland dies in the protective arms of Dale Cooper and is given a full and dramatically serious escort towards the white light of absolution.

At crucial points this so-called "avant-garde" series thus refuses to allow the social desire of the oppressed women it represents an honest voice. It merely displays and reaffirms our victimization and marginality by allowing the patriarchs to escape. David Lynch, indeed, may be formally and stylistically radical for television, but in terms of content, he is alarmingly conventional. This has to do with the fact that the structure underlying the grotesque images he creates is entrenched in the values of modernist "fun": let's spell that "white-middle-class-male-privilege." Investigation of the body of woman marked by rape and murder as a sign for male sexuality is the "artistic" predilection that the "post"modernist and "avant-garde" *Twin Peaks* shares with modernism.

Given these (non-satirical, apolitical) elements of the grotesque at work in *Twin Peaks*, how are we to measure its real implications against its self-declared radical purposes? If, as Thomson indicates, the grotesque is an "aggressive weapon" used to shock us and make us perceive the world anew, *Twin Peaks* wins on one count. Bob's violence against women is certainly aggressive. But clearly that violence is telling us nothing new.





We are saturated daily with identical images of brutalized women in all the media. In *Twin Peaks* there is no attempt to suggest or articulate reasons why Bob/anonymous men find such pleasure in raping and mutilating young women, or why adult men like Ben and Leland desire young women (let alone their own daughters) sexually.

Along with the grotesqueries of modernism in *Twin Peaks* go modernism's surrealist fantasies. Surrealism is about retreat and regression to the intrapsychic spaces of the primitive unconscious. Through attention to dreams and the subconscious, the surrealist works to bring the magical, the hallucinatory, and the irrational to the surface of consciousness in the name of psychic liberation. As Laurie Ouellete observes in

her article "Is David Lynch Creepier Than His Movies?", Lynch is known for his dreamlike manipulation of images and for "...his trademark themes: death, violence, mutilation, deformity, sex, kinkiness, and secret traumas."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Cooper's dream sequences in *Twin Peaks* are seductive and charming, and Bob achieves success as everybody's worst nightmare incarnate. But do these fantasies liberate us psychically, or manipulate and oppress us politically? If we accept Thomson's suggestion that "progressive art is about consciousness, regressive art is about the subconscious"<sup>17</sup> and apply it critically to the work of David Lynch, we are drawn to the conclusion that *Twin Peaks*, indeed, is regressive, reactionary, reprehensible art.



## THE TELEVISION TEXT AND INTERTEXTUALITY

It is on this note of regression that I think hinges the whole crux of the modernism/postmodernism debate for feminist analysis and its significance *vis à vis* Lynch. As the grotesque and surrealism represent a dangerous regression to intrapsychic tension, primary emotion, the dream-state, and the unleashing of subconscious drives, postmodernism represents a dangerous regression to and a ceaseless, uncritical quoting of the sexist and misogynist meanings embedded in modernism. Lynch's brand of postmodern fun, like surrealism, like the grotesque, is a fundamentally backward-looking aesthetic form that masquerades as ethically substantive and progressive. In "Blue Velvet: Postmodern Contradiction" Norman Denzin writes incisively on the questionable politics of the postmodern text:

These texts locate strange, eclectic, violent, timeless worlds in the present. They make fun of the past as they keep it alive. They search for new ways to present the unrepresentable, so as to break down the barriers that keep the profane out of the everyday. However, they take conservative political stances, while they valorize, and exploit the radical social margins of society. Nothing escapes the postmodern eye. But this eye, its visions and its voices, is unrelenting in its willingness to give up the past in the name of the future...it attempts to find safe regions of escape in the fantasies and nostalgia of the past. Dreams are the postmodern solution to life in the present.<sup>18</sup>

David Lynch, that quintessential postmodernist, is really engaged in the worst kind of regressive grotesquerie as he plays sometimes comically but always irresponsibly with the sexist, misogynist horrors of our contemporary socio-political reality. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" Fredric Jameson argues that whereas the parodic style of modernism was often able to cast ridicule on bourgeois values by mocking and satirizing original works, the pastiche of postmodernism that replaces effective parody can only quote and imitate bourgeois style, losing in the process the critical ulterior motive of satire:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.<sup>19</sup>

Full of formal play but empty of critical content, the postmodern pastiche (like the modern grotesque or surrealist dream) merely bathes in the morass of patriarchal ideology and drinks it up. In *Cambodia: A Book for People Who find Television Too Slow*, Brian Fawcett sees television and its programming as the quintessential vehicle for disseminating that ideology, which he calls the "manna" of America, media centre of the Global Village and the "universal" values of Western patriarchy.

*Twin Peaks* is the ultimate televisual postmodern pastiche. While marketed as something outside of or beyond run-of-the-mill TV fare, it is nevertheless part and parcel of television's endless flow of sexist banality, empty style and mindless male violence masquerading as generalized "evil" that, as Fawcett argues, nourishes no one:

But the manna doesn't nourish people. Instead, it diminishes and humiliates them by presenting images of impossibly finished and stylish landscapes; images of men who are virile, well-dressed, urbane and violent; women who are beautiful, sexually alluring, remote in their polished perfections. They are the perfect consumers of product, these television perfections; unhampered by inability, unwillingness, or second thoughts, serenely thoughtless in their slickly violent confrontations with ugliness and the other human frailties they treat as evil.<sup>20</sup>

As part of ABC's viewing package, *Twin Peaks* is also part of a sophisticated and complex corporate strategy for selling as much air time as possible to advertisers. The goal of all television networks is to sell products for advertisers to a capitalist culture obsessed with youth, money, success, and violence — what Raymond Williams calls, in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, our 'way of life':

The 'commercial' character of television has then to be seen at several levels: as the making of programmes for profit in a known market; as a channel for advertising; and as a cultural and political form directly shaped by and dependent on the norms of a capitalist society, selling both consumer goods and a 'way of life' based on them, in an ethos that is at once locally generated, by domestic capitalist interests and authorities, and internationally organized, as a political project, by the dominant capitalist power.<sup>21</sup>

ABC, as the last to be formed of the big three television networks (or, in Fred Inglis' formulation, "fantasy screens")<sup>22</sup> has historically functioned to pick up the viewers lost to NBC and CBS. It has done so, in part, by constructing an image for itself as the most adventurous and avant-garde network. Quoting from an interview about *Twin Peaks* with ABC entertainment president Robert Iger, Steve Pond writes:

16. Ouellete, *op.cit.*, p.14

17. Thomson, *op.cit.*, p.56

18. Norman K. Denzin, "Blue Velvet: Postmodern Contradictions," *Theory, Culture and Society*, v.5, 1988, p.471

19. Jameson, *op.cit.*, p.114

20. Brian Fawcett, *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986), p.170

21. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana Collins, 1974), p.41

22. Fred Inglis, *Media Theory: an Introduction*. Cambridge, Mass. Basil Blackwell, 1990, p.41



Meanwhile, he added, the network strongly supports the show and knows that it's helped "immeasurably" to boost ABC's reputation as the most adventurous of the three networks.... This experience," he said, "whether it ends up being long-term in nature, in terms of *Twin Peaks*' life on ABC, or whether it is in fact short-term, will still be very, very positive for us".<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, ABC's aim in airing *Twin Peaks* is profit. Working to sell its typical viewing audience to advertisers, it must hold the attention of the core Lynch youth-cult audience, yet attract older adults with bigger buying power (i.e., Yuppies and intellectuals who have ostensibly abandoned television as mindless drivel but can be persuaded to flatter themselves in viewing *Twin Peaks* as radical and avant-garde). Accordingly, a programme like *Twin Peaks* can manage both of these demographic groups: 1) through its casting of sexy teenagers who are easy (for anyone trained by a youth culture) to look at and identify with, and, 2) through its casting of more responsible and conservative 30-40ish adults as central protagonists (Kyle MacLachlan as agent Cooper, Michael Ontkean as Sheriff Truman) who will give the older, more intellectual audience segment a secure moral position with which to identify, while encouraging their nostalgic yet ironic engagement with the (postmodern) text.

Then, the serial format of the weekly soap-opera as a fully entrenched television genre further serves to manage and contain the meanings and content of the show itself. Indeed, soap-opera might be considered the postmodern genre *par excellence* (witness its phenomenal night-time popularity throughout the 1980s) as it, perhaps more than any other genre, embodies the illusion of "timeless worlds in the present" that Denzin describes as the essence of the postmodern sensibility. In any case, we understand *Twin Peaks* because, ultimately, we understand and have assimilated the rules of soap-opera and the murder-mystery series particularly, and the rules of commercial television generally. *Twin Peaks*, whether it wants to admit this or not, may have begun by parodying mainstream network television, but is coming to a close firmly embedded and entrenched in its generic predilections, its flow, its logic and its values. As Jane Feuer sees it in "Genre Study and Television," television is a cultural forum "involving the negotiation of shared beliefs and values, and helping to maintain and rejuvenate the social order as well as assisting it in adapting to change."<sup>24</sup> But, rather than embracing and promoting social change in any fundamental way, *Twin Peaks* merely pays lip-service to change by claiming to be radically different on the level of form and style. For *Twin Peaks* (that which is marketed and masquerades as progressive and avant-garde television) is now, in fact, part of a sophisticated marketing machine designed for a male fun and profit motive that works ultimately to entrench and validate cultural misogyny while projecting all of patriarchal society's ills onto generalized evil, the poor and the marginal. Bob, with his jean jacket and long, greying hair is *passé*; he is retro in all the wrong ways — retro to the wrong decade — a fashion no-no in the hyper-cool, hyper-coiffed, hyper-capitalistic 1990s. As such, he is forced to bear, stylistically, the substantive burden of a nation's evil.

*Twin Peaks* is not simply part of network television, an apparatus of dominant ideology. Its textual implications are much more far-reaching. For television and its programming are themselves part of the larger phenomenon that has come to be known, in cultural studies, as intertextuality. In "Presupposition and Intertextuality" Jonathan Culler writes: "Intertextuality is less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than an assertion of a work's participation in a discursive space and its relation to the codes which are the potential formalizations of that space."<sup>25</sup> The concept of intertextuality as Culler understands it refers to the cultural landscape as an infinite system of texts or a field of discursive practices wherein individual texts mingle, circulate, take place. Culture is seen by Culler as an arena of texts/ genres/media/authors that function together to generate meaning. Intertextuality assumes that there is a mutual presumption and presupposition of knowledge when we engage with cultural artifacts. These artifacts, or texts, organize themselves in terms of the culture around them. Thus, texts like *Twin Peaks* can be said to carve out meaning in relation to, with the help of, and through other texts. An article on *Twin Peaks* from *Us: The Entertainment Magazine*, *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* by Jennifer Lynch, and an item from the "infotainment" television programme *Current Affair* can be used to demonstrate this intertextual operation and its ideological effects.

Given the patriarchal bias of the culture in which *Twin Peaks* takes place and circulates, it is not that surprising that *Twin Peaks* and its intertexts carry the meanings and forms of masculine privilege, sexism and misogyny. "Shades of Change," an article by Steve Pond about *Twin Peaks* which appeared in the May 28, 1990 edition of *Us Magazine*, works to promote the series, its male protagonists, and its author as artistic, progressive, avant-garde. The very title "Shades of Change" and the tone of the article itself suggest that *Twin Peaks* is nothing short of revolutionary, light-years ahead of its time, and "nine leagues above the head of the normal TV viewers."<sup>26</sup> And the photographs, with captions, of the two male protagonists which dominate the article clearly work to these ends as well.

On *Twin Peaks*, Dale Cooper/Kyle MacLachlan and Sheriff Truman/Michael Ontkean are both stable, conservative, down-to-earth characters. They embody normality and as such secure a moral centre for the programme. But "Shades of Change" changes all that in order to intrigue and titillate the younger reader and re-sell (reinforce) these figures as funky, avant-garde Lynchians. On the cover photograph, spike hair-

23. Pond, op.cit., p.24

24. Jane Feuer. "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, Robert C. Allen, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p.119

25. Jonathan Culler. "Presupposition and Intertextuality." *Modern Language Notes*, v.91, n.6 (Dec), 1976, p.1382

26. Pond, op.cit., p.22

27. *ibid.*, p.26

28. *ibid.*, p.25

29. Jennifer Lynch. *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), p.181

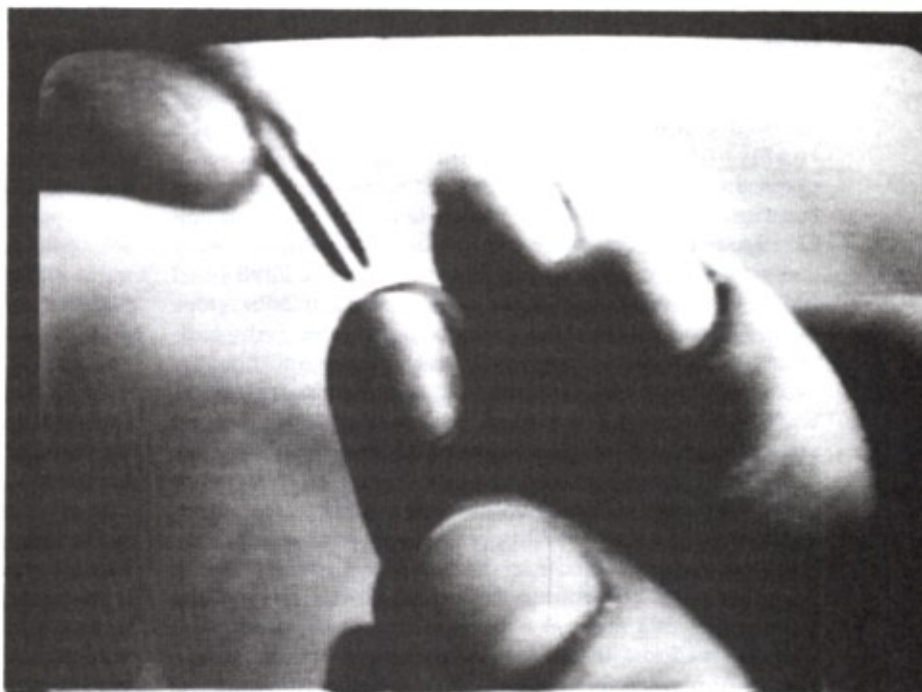


dos and an earring on Ontkian sexualize and glamourize the normally staid heroes, while the double-page black-and-white photography that opens the article promotes them as arty types sporting dark sunglasses. The caption echoes the effect in describing them as "Cool Cats." But, of course, according to the underlying logic of patriarchal empowerment, they cannot be portrayed as too weird in order to ensure that their masculine authority is not impinged. Significantly, this heroic male duo is made to sandwich and control the article, just as they sandwich and control the series and stabilize its meanings. The photograph that ends "Shades of Change" shows them in medium close-up through a window, laughing, with this accompanying caption: "It's like I get excited about going to work everyday," says Kyle MacLachlan... "It's like, Yeah, I get to have fun!"<sup>27</sup> Of course, Yeah, what "Shades of Change" promotes is, like, something we have already seen enough of: Lynch's brand of "fun." Pond writes: "In another episode one of the characters, a wife-beater, is shown carefully putting a bar of soap into a sock and then swinging it as he closes in on his pitiful prey, his wife. Yes, *Twin Peaks* is decidedly different, as well as daring and disturbing."<sup>28</sup> Anonymous wife-beating, in Pond's lexicon, is "different" and "daring." "Different," when one in four women in North America is the victim of physical abuse at the hand of her husband? Televisually "daring," when you can see the same violence repeatedly perpetrated on women in films, magazines and videos?

Like "Shades of Change," *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* is also part of *Twin Peaks*' intertextual nexus of meaning. Written by David Lynch's own daughter Jennifer, it is obviously a commodity-for-profit directly spun-off from the television programme, as well as a vehicle by which the programme and the larger culture disseminate patriarchal ideology. Through this supposed secret diary, we are voyeuristically encouraged to further probe, where *Twin Peaks* itself leaves off, the sexual enigma that Laura Palmer/women represent. Ostensibly the 'real-life' diary of the murdered girl that can let us in on the darkest secrets of her soul, this book is actually premised on the violation, victimization, and silencing of women.

First, to read a diary is to violate privacy. Considered in this way, Jennifer Lynch's 'creative' offering to the paternal Lynch stew-pot becomes a grand metaphor for the violation and disrespect of women's privacy so characteristic of our culture in general. Second, to read this particular diary is to see women turned into helpless, pathetic victims. Laura Palmer, of course, is the victim of the demonical Bob. But worse than this, she is also portrayed as the victim of her own lack of self-respect and dignity as a woman. What *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* teaches us is that women are inherently "dirty" and "abnormal" (i.e., not men) and so deserving of ill-treatment, humiliation, and punishment:

I just wanted to be normal. I just want to be like everybody else. I don't like having to be careful of who to talk to because someone might hate me if they knew the truth about me, about how dirty I am. And how somehow, I don't remember it, but, somehow everyday I asked to be treated this way. It always happens, so it must be something I don't realize I say, or something I think. I told him how I went to my safety deposit box and how I saw the drug money there and I had a fantasy about taking it and running away forever. But I didn't deserve that. I deserved to stay here. I had done something wrong. My heart hurt so badly, but I knew I had to stay.<sup>29</sup>



Perhaps the only thing more pathetic and damaging than this story leading up to Laura Palmer's "deserved" demise is the fact that Jennifer Lynch, as a young woman, wrote it: all, seemingly, in the spirit of Dad's sense of "fun" — and profit! Third, to read *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* as a cultural artefact is to bear witness to the silencing of women (in typical patriarchal fashion) through the Madonna/whore split. The layout of the diary is itself a metaphor for Laura's female duplicitousness: a smiling, virginal prom queen on the outside, she is filth and fornication under the cover and between the sheets. The "secret truth" about the figure of *Twin Peaks*' lovely, licentious Laura Palmer is, in fact, old hat. She is post-modern patriarchy's enigma (the sign of woman) personified. Thus, what we read when we read this text in context is merely another representation of the willful erasure of female identity, subjectivity, and presence from our cultural landscape. *Twin Peaks* begins with Laura already-dead; and the final words of the secret diary merely contribute to the generalized cultural sense of female inertia: "I have to be numb," she writes, and Jennifer Lynch finishes her off — sends her to



her woman's doom: "The preceding was Laura's last entry. She was found dead just days later."<sup>30</sup>

In November of 1990, CBS's *Current Affair* aired an item called "Twin Peaks Murder Mystery: A Real-Life Mini Movie," wherein the actual murder of Mary Ann Alexander, a twenty-two year old nurse from Lowell, Massachusetts, is interpreted through the signs and motifs of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. Arty shots of birds, tree branches, towering pines, and the flowing waters of Lowell's old mill dam are combined with the *Twin Peaks* theme music and a photograph of Mary Ann as a Lynchian backdrop to detective David Tounsignant's investigation and eventual solution of her murder. Mary Ann, Tounsignant discovers after ten years of dogged persistence, was killed by neighbour Doug Phinney. He had bludgeoned her with a camera as she awakened to catch him in the act of adding her to his secret photo collection of nude women. On *Current Affair*, intertextuality runs amok, if you will, as television "news" interprets cultural "reality" (the murder of women) through television soap-opera. In this "real-life mini movie," detective Tounsignant becomes, like agent Cooper, the male hero who works virtually single-handedly to analyze the evidence, solve the mystery and expose the criminal. Doug Phinney is arrested and jailed for life. But deeper analysis, of course (as in *Twin Peaks*), stops there. The surface questions are cleared up — the guilty individual is found and he will pay for his crime. But the more profound, structural questions (i.e., why men in our culture fear and hate women so much, why women are objectified and dehumanized under patriarchy and capitalism) are never broached. Harriet Alexander, Mary Anne's mother, is not unrepresentative of the majority reaction in her feeling of satisfaction that the mystery has been solved and justice done. She says, "There's closure to the whole thing now. It won't bring her back, but at least we have the answers to all the questions — as to why it happened, how it happened, and who did it... From the bottom of our hearts, thanks David." Harriet Alexander might indeed feel relief and my intention is neither to deny her this emotion nor mock her grief. But what we must critically question here is the power that we give texts to give us closure — the license we give these various media narratives to in reality fix patriarchal meanings and entrench ideology while seemingly providing "all the answers." To what extent will we continue to accept omnipotent male protagonists in their quest to uncover "truth," which as far as I can see is really the enigma of women buried in dead female flesh? To what extent will we continue to valorize laughing men like Lynch and the stories they tell? The "creative" answers that *Twin Peaks*' intertextual collage works to feed us must, I think, be vigilantly questioned and challenged.

#### ■ ■ ■ THE MASCULINE STRUCTURES OF NARRATIVE FORM

The narrative structure of *Twin Peaks*, like many other popular cultural objects, sustains a trajectory of male desire to do and to see violence against women. Steve Pond unwittingly relates brutality against women to the basic structuration of

narrative in our culture when he writes: "Those who watched the pilot were anxious to find out who set the show in motion by torturing and killing debutante Laura Palmer."<sup>31</sup> Setting the patriarchal show in motion all-too-frequently means stopping women dead in their tracks. Indeed, the establishing sequence of *Twin Peaks* offers the mutilated, raped and plastic-wrapped body of a young teenaged girl for our viewing pleasure. Significantly, as we have seen, Laura Palmer is already dead — silenced before she can speak, cry, name, accuse, or fight. Typical of the structure and logic of mainstream narratives, someone else will investigate and tell the woman's story. In the case of David Lynch's narrative, authority is vested in the male protagonist, FBI agent Dale Cooper, who arrives in *Twin Peaks* to get to the bottom of this mystery-spectacle that is literally embodied by — written on the body of — Laura Palmer. Through his eyes, his subjectivity, the viewing collectivity investigates the traditional (modernist) enigma of woman: Laura is both Madonna and whore; prom-queen and nymphomaniac. While Cooper and his sidekick Sheriff Truman provide the secure moral position with which we identify, characters like Andy (the sensitive man who cries at the sight of the dead Laura) is marginalized as a naive and incompetent juvenile and ridiculed by Truman for his emotional display.

In the course of this voyeuristic investigation, we are lucky enough to eventually get a replay of the "main event" that we missed: the physical, visceral act of violence directed at the female body. It is the moment that, as patriarchally-conditioned subjects, we have all been waiting to see. Maddy Ferguson, look-alike cousin to Laura Palmer, is murdered. The act is rendered in detail through slow motion camera-work under the banner of David Lynch's ironic creative genius, and Cooper is helpless to intervene. Her murder, while painful to watch, is nevertheless also rendered an object of aesthetic contemplation, even possibly of titillation. Uncle Leland/Bob sends Maddy flying, face first into a glass-covered reproduction of a bull moose while he screams about Missoula, Montana — her home-town within the diegesis, as well as Lynch's own home-town. Is this the postmodern text's ironic and self-reflexive reference to patriarchy, to men as dumb animals, to the natural forces that make we poor humans behave so violently? Or is it just another example of the unproductive tension produced by the humour and horror of the grotesque mode of modernism worked out on the bodies of women? The narrative goes on to allow Bob to escape, and to send poor Leland to the white light of eternal rest. Again, it is important to discern and acknowledge the fact that Leland's death scene is played straight, with utmost dramatic seriousness, and with none of the grotesque ambivalence that characterized the scene of Maddy's death and the subsequent scenes of the disposal of her corpse. Clearly, Leland's shower scene is supposed to be cleansing, even touching; it is supposed to strike a chord of empathy in the viewer. Thus, evil and the supernatural, and not Leland himself and the patriarchal structures that determine his behaviour, take the rap.

The ambivalence of the grotesque, the indeterminacy of soap opera, and the power and license of the aggressive drives of masculine narrative underlying Laura/Maddy's



death, do not motivate narrative closure but the desire to see another murder, to anticipate the next victim. Wyndham Earle (Cooper's ex-partner) becomes "evil's" next vehicle and Cooper's human adversary in a deathly game of chess. This shift is inadvertently telling, it reveals what the narrative is *really* about: the contest between men for ascendancy, worked out on the bodies of women. Accordingly, in one episode Wyndham Earle sets the stakes in the Lynch gaming-house by calling the potential victims together through a mysterious note: Who will it be? Shelly, Donna, or Audrey? All young; all pretty; all *women*. All in the name of a story well-told? In Lynch's own words, he's just "going along watching this fantastic train that leads to a new world and another story."<sup>32</sup> The ABC train?:

Jack McQueen, senior vice president and general manager of the Foote, Cone and Belding/Telecom ad agency, concurs. "Maybe broadcast networks can use this to grab some of their eroding shares back," he says. "We need these kinds of things on network television to stem the tide of eroding audience to cable, VCRs, books and talking to your wife. We called last season the Season Without Reason, and hopefully this next season will be the Anything to Be Different Season."

*Twin Peaks*, he adds, "is an attempt to do something that broadcast TV can do better and afford to do better than anybody else, which is to deliver a weekly entertainment event that people will tune in to see because they don't want to be the last person in the office or the neighborhood who didn't see the last episode."<sup>33</sup>

The last episode of *Twin Peaks* has proved to be a postmodern train to nowhere. Cooper himself becomes Bob, prey to a seemingly universal, abstract evil. And we are treated not once, but twice, to the disfigurement by anonymous evil of the face of the nun-cum-beauty queen Annie Blackburn. On this same old "new world" of David Lynch, we peaks geeks are seemingly all bought and sold.

## AUTHORSHIP

What seems to pass in some circles as Lynch's "ironic creative genius" is, in fact, a repetition and re-entrenchment of women's victimization under patriarchy's form of fun for the 1990s. Indeed, the effects of the grotesque without the political and ethical effects of satire are dangerous. More tension-producing than liberating, the grotesque mode of modernism appropriated by "post"modern TV aesthetics leaves us treading water, still drowning in an essentially misogynist alphabet soup. While at first glance Lynch's grotesque style does seem to be vital, new, and full of delicious irony, closer and prolonged formal, intertextual, narrative, and content analysis reveals the same old moles on the face of patriarchy. Where it might be considered in some circles "liberating" for Lynch to expose and exorcise the demonic in men through a distinctly postmodern articulation of the grotesque, it cannot be overlooked that such exorcism nevertheless still requires the disfigurement, rape, and murder of women. As Philip

Thomson writes, the grotesque always ultimately turns us away from the intellectual function and appeal of irony, satire and parody toward its own "primarily emotional" function and appeal.<sup>34</sup> He goes so far as to say it returns us to a childhood state wherein "intrapsychic tension" goes unresolved and the moral distinction between that which is comic and that which is reprehensible is not yet possible. These additional quotes from Lynch's own lexicon demonstrate a similar *grotesque* inability on his part to make moral or ethical distinctions.

[Long pause] Well, I don't know about modern women.

If you have any sort of moral thing or boundaries you won't cross over, that's going to shape your story. But if you start worrying right away about the meanings of everything, chances are your poor intellect is only going to glean like a little portion of it.<sup>35</sup>

Yeah. Oh, Yeah. When you go with intuition or subconscious or whatever, you can't really filter that stuff out. You have to kind of let it come out and happen, without interrupting it. Once you start intellectualizing too much — or talking to the doctor about it — you might say, "Oh, my god, man, that's very bad, I don't want people to think that!" So you start filtering, chopping off that little conduit. So it's better not to know so much, in a way, about what things mean or how they might be interpreted, or you'll be too afraid to let it keep happening.<sup>36</sup>

There are some women that you want to hit because you're getting a feeling from them that they want it, or maybe they upset you in a certain way. I see this happening. But I don't really understand it.<sup>37</sup>

I think that the freeing power of money is a very healing sort of thing. Because all we want to do is to be able to do what we want to do. And if we can do that, we get the sense of freedom.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, it seems that with David Lynch on television we have the quintessential manchild-artist of the grotesque form of postmodernism. At play on his mountain with his little conduit — at play with the dregs of masculine desire in the name of freedom — Lynch just wants to have fun. I guess televisual forms of postmodern pleasure, play, contradiction, abstraction and undecidability can be a liberating thing — depending on your politics.

30. *ibid.*, p.184

31. Steve Pond, *op.cit.*, p.22

32. David Breskin, "I Was Sort of Embarrassed That My Parents Were So Normal," *Rolling Stone*, n.586 (Sept. 6), 1990, p.62

33. Pond, *op.cit.*, p.26

34. Thomson, *op.cit.*, p.47

35. Breskin, *op.cit.*, p.63

36. *ibid.*, p.99

37. Ouellette, *op.cit.*, p.15

38. Breskin, *op.cit.*, p.99

# In Light of Difference

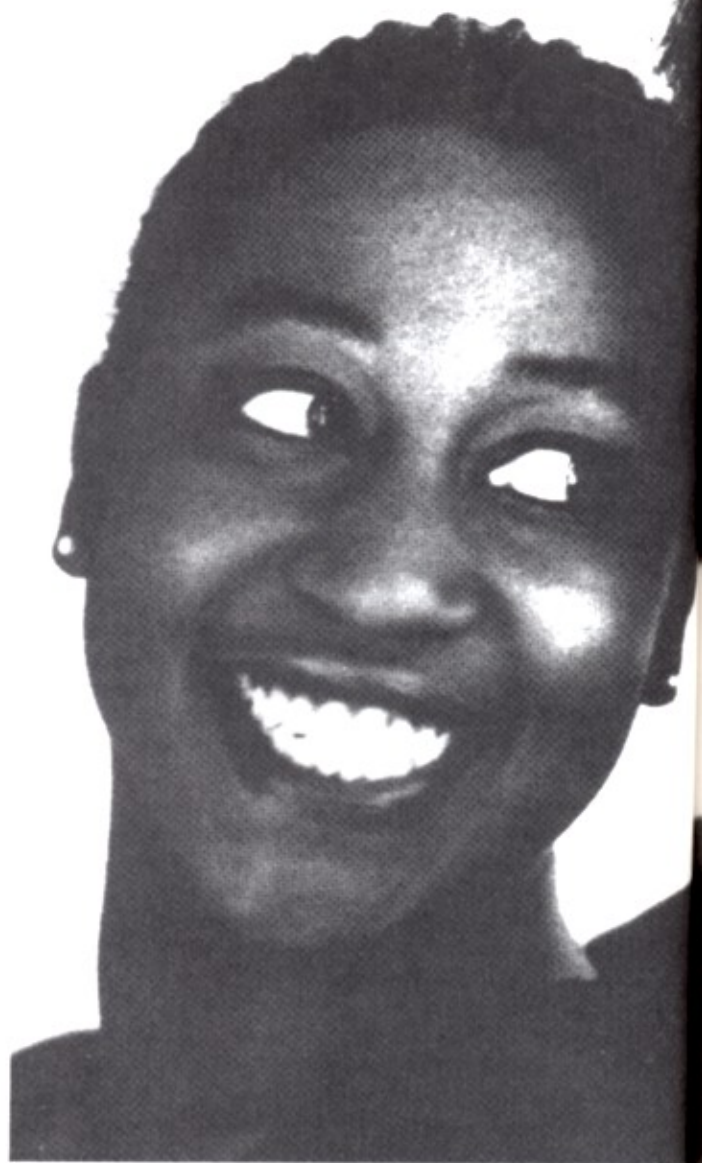
IN VISIBLE COLOURS  
FILM/VIDEO FESTIVAL  
AND SYMPOSIUM

by Monika Gagnon

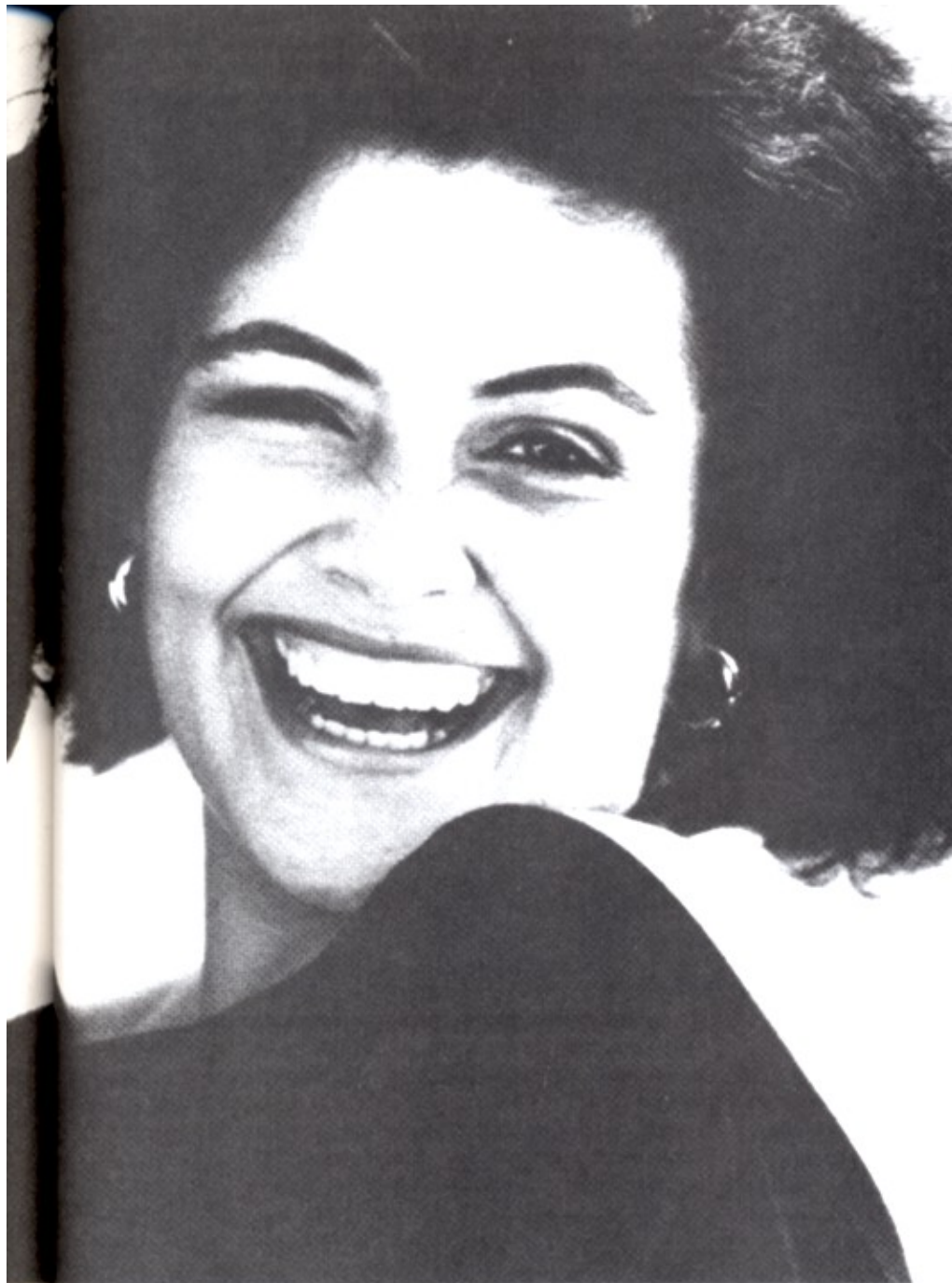
In November of 1989, Vancouver hosted *In Visible Colours*, a remarkable, groundbreaking international festival and symposium showcasing the films and videos of women of colour and Third World women.

In retrospect, it is useful to locate this unprecedented event within the proliferating context of a cultural production and theory that now finds race and race politics at its fore. Not unlike the impact feminist politics has had on the arena of culture over the last two decades, the effects of "the new cultural politics of difference" as Cornel West has effectively described it, is forcibly disrupting the traditional structures and paradigms of discourse and production. *In Visible Colours* made the explosive power of this disruption significantly apparent.

Seventy-five international delegates were in attendance, 100 film and videos were screened, and thirteen moderated panel discussions and workshops took place. The diversity of the opening panel hinted at the provocative exchanges of







*Perfect Image?*

by Maureen Blackwood

information and vast range of challenges that would be experienced over the break-neck, five-day schedule of events, as each of the five panelists voiced their equally significant, but divergent areas of concern for their own practices and contexts of production. American film animation director Ayoka Chenzira underlined the importance of her alliance with black male filmmakers at a moment when "the police continue to enter our communities and murder our men and children," and concluded, "this cannot be denied in the name of a women's movement or feminism." Flora M'mbugu-Schelling, describing herself as the "only independent woman filmmaker in Tanzania," expressed the hope of networking with women in Europe and North America, where easier access to materials, equipment and film labs might facilitate the pro-

duction and distribution of her films. Vancouver film and videomaker Loretta Todd spoke of the significance of these media as tools for telling stories, for voicing an affirmation of rights and thereby aiding to create a measure of autonomy for Native cultures. Todd has also eloquently, if controversially articulated the importance of Native cultural autonomy in her article, "Notes on Appropriation," where she argues that the current threat of cultural apartheid necessitates that Canadian Native voices have sovereignty over their own images and symbols in order to recover and write their histories.<sup>1</sup> While there is a known danger to this kind of separatism which feminism has explored in great depth and alerted us to (in that demarcations must be made between authentic and inauthentic practices, determining who is allowed to speak on what



*Sari Red* by Pratibha Parmar

issues and determining how "certification" occurs, and by whom), Todd's challenge is to recognize the specificity of Native history and the strategies needed to counter the potential annihilation of this culture. In other words, Todd defines the strategic necessity of developing a site-specific cultural politic that may not only challenge, but also contradict other models of cultural resistance.

Two contributions from Japan also elicited important considerations of definition and address. Japan not being a Third World country raises the question of how and by whom women of colour are defined, clearly in relation to the occidental west, in this instance, not specifically in relation to their own cultural contexts. This further broached issues of terminology and self-definition within an expanded identity politic that now intersects gender with cultural and racial difference. Yet, in spite, or perhaps because of the complex challenges posed by the works screened and issues raised by the symposium, there could be no denying the sense of empowerment attained by affirming such a complexity of identities within the already marginal spaces that are women's film and videomaking.

Mexican videomaker, Julia Barco's *Pregnant with Dreams* (1988) embraced such contradictions and was in many ways emblematic of the power of (the utopic) transcultural feminist politics (or *sisterhood*), that made *In Visible Colours* possible; a politic that perseveres in spite of fracturing from internal differences, and severe feminist criticism and demands for specificity. Characterized by an often distracting, extremely rough shooting and editing style, Barco's video casually documents the fourth *Encuentra Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe*, which brought together over 1200 Latin American and Caribbean women in 1987. What emerges is a vivid portrait of intellectual and spiritual exchange, both in the small, informal consciousness-raising groups and in the massive group encounters that were the opening and closing plenary sessions. Particularly powerful is an intimately framed, extended discussion between a group of women, chain-smoking and drinking after dinner, in which they passionately debate the differences between the women's movement and feminism: the former, understood for its belief in gradual social change, versus the latter, characterized by its potential for revolution. Justifying her position as a radical feminist, a Nicaraguan



woman describes visiting a village raped and pillaged by American-backed contras and her horror at discovering severed women's breasts carefully placed on tree branches.

As testimony to the barbaric activities perpetuated by American foreign policy throughout Latin America in the name of democracy and freedom, *Pregnant with Dreams* more implicitly underlines the secondary position women's struggles frequently occupy within so-called "larger" struggles against imperialism, neo-colonialism and religious fanaticism. Three documentary videos, *Gift of Love* (1989) by India's Meera Dewan, *From the Burning Embers* (1988) by Media Storm, a group of five Indian women, and *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* (1988) by Pakistan's Sabiha Sumar, all focus specifically on the laws and tradition that sanctify the subordination of women within the fundamentalist religious and conservative contexts of the Indian sub-continent. Respectively, dowry deaths, *Sati* or bride burnings, and the punishment of adultery by stoning are among the highly-charged issues dealt with in these videos. Many other strong contributions by Indian film and video-makers (Mira Nair's critically acclaimed *India Cabaret* (1986) on India's sex-industry workers, as well as *The Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya* (*Babulal Bhuiya Ki Qur Bani*) (1988) by Manjira Datta, *Voices from Baliapal* (1987) by Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit, Deepa Dhanraj's *What Has Happened to this City?* (*Kya Hua Iss Shahar Ko?*) (1986) and Vijaya Mulay's *Gangubai Hangal* (1987)), attest to the strong counter-cultural tradition of documentary practices established within the margins of one of the world's dominant and prolific film industries.

In contrast to the journalistic documentary styles characteristic of much of this Indian work, more experimental modes were also represented, though this experimentation did not subsume a strong political content. The interrogation of the neutrality and truth-value of traditional documentary approaches is carried out in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) which deploys a multiplicity of representations in order to problematize and undermine the powerful, common stereotypes of Vietnam and Vietnamese women. Using actors to recite scripted monologues transcribed from recorded conversations with a number of Vietnamese women, Trinh interweaves these dramatizations with archival footage of women in diverse sites: images from folk culture, media representations and those from the resistance movement.

Heiny Srour's *Leila and the Wolves* (1984) reconstructs a version of history that redresses women's significant, if invisible role within Lebanon's ongoing civil war through a series of flashbacks experienced by a student, Leila. Composed of archival photographs and film footage as well as dramatic reconstructions of political events, this film also explores the

Todd defines the strategic necessity of developing a site-specific cultural politics that may not only challenge, but also contradict other models of cultural resistance.



Claire Prieto

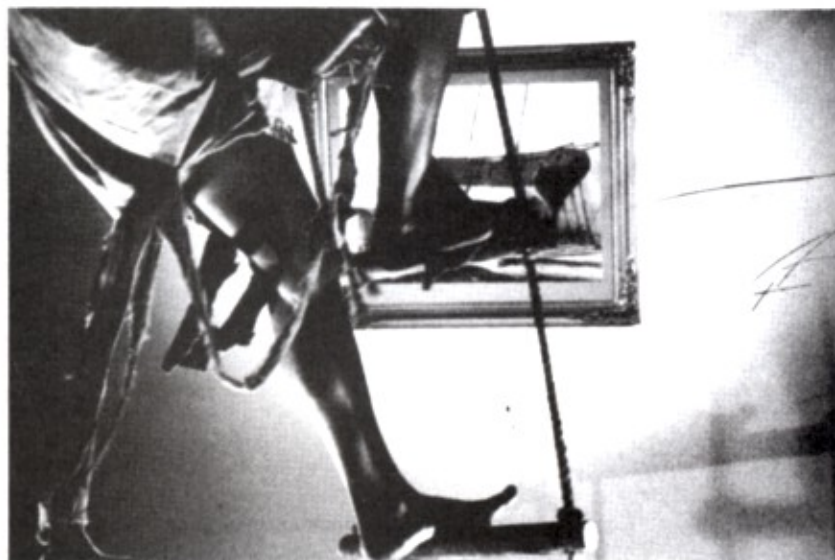
myriad ways in which historical exclusion and absence occur: an extreme wide shot reveals groups of women on balconies dumping heavy planters and large pots of boiling water onto soldiers who are shooting their brothers, husbands, fathers and lovers below in the streets; the frame gradually tilts down and tightens, eliminating the women above as the image freezes to become a black-and white photograph on a gallery wall, one that isolates and immortalizes the male streetfighters in battle and excludes the women's efforts in battle.

A diversity of Canadian works, with the combined effect of representing a cultural plurality, attempted to redress the absences of sexual and racial difference that *Leila and the Wolves*, for instance, locates within dominant, official histories. Works such as Claire Prieto's and Roger McTair's *Home to Buxton* (1987), Dionne Brand and Claire Prieto's *Older, Stronger, Wiser* (1989) and Sylvia Hamilton and Claire Prieto's *Black Mother, Black Daughter* (1989) all recover a remarkable, but largely unknown history of Canada's black communities through interviews and lively testimonials from older community members. Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View* (1988) more explicitly explores the reconstruction of histories by oral

means, layering the lives and experiences of generations of Japanese Canadian women within her family. Carol Geddes celebratory, *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief* (1986), also underlines the strength of Native heritage, with its profiles of five Native women discussing their chosen careers. Loretta Todd's *Eagle Run* (1989) dramatizes the significance of oral culture and history for Native Peoples, as a young athlete seeks guidance from her elders to learn the traditional meaning and spiritual importance of athletics.

Many, many other films and videos deserve mention. Tracey Moffatt's videos (*Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), *A Change of Face* (1988), *Solid Women* (1989), *Spread the Word* (1987)), represent and are directed towards Australia's aboriginal communities. Merata Mita's *Bastion Point* (1980) and *Patu!* (1983) address, respectively, the struggles of Maori peoples over land claims and apartheid policies in New Zealand.

*Nice Coloured Girls* by Tracey Moffatt



As is no doubt evident here, it is virtually impossible to speak of *In Visible Colours* in generalities.

What emerged was a remarkable sense of difference within the sexual and racial differences that have marked women of colour working in industrialized nations, and women living and working in the Third World.

Considered together, Moffatt, Mita and Todd's works had the potent effect of foregrounding the repetitive cycle of neo-colonial, imperialist power, underlining the striking parallel experiences and oppression of aboriginal peoples in British colonized nations of the First World, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Strong selections from Britain attest to the diversity comprising England's cultural landscape, among them: Mona Hatoum's *Eyes Skinned* (1988) and *Measures of Distance* (1988), Pratibha Parmar's *Sari Red* (1988), Gurinder Chada's *I'm British But...* (1989) and the hilarious *Perfect Image?* (1988) by Maureen Blackwood. Another highlight was Peng Xiaolian's narrative feature drama *Women's Story* (1987), originally shot on film, but banned in China and therefore screened in a severely disintegrated, smuggled video version. Xiaolian, in attendance at the screening, underlined the perceived subver-

sive quality of the film's content: the defiance of strict government controls on family planning, the challenge to girls' and women's traditionally subordinate function within the family, and the poignant solidarity between women.

The works and discussions at *In Visible Colours* implicitly demonstrated the myriad, insidious forms that sexist and racist ideologies will take and how they require a range of strategies and practices to be countered. Like sexism, the manifestations of racism are specific to social structures and contexts of power, and are further uniquely experienced by distinct racial and cultural groups as they are themselves intersected by gender, sexual orientation, and class differences. The profoundly felt subjective investments in these social and cultural explorations, as Loretta Todd's "Notes on Appropriation" eloquently reflects upon, further propels a constellation of conceptual contradictions as theory confronts practice.

As is no doubt evident here, it is virtually impossible to speak of *In Visible Colours* in generalities. What emerged was a remarkable sense of difference within the sexual and racial differences that have marked women of colour working in industrialized nations, and women living and working in the Third World. While the realization of this festival depended precisely on foregrounding the shared experiences of oppression, sexism and racism lived by a global range of women, what the event and the screened works finally made apparent is how these realities are determined by specific social, economic, political and cultural conditions. The availability of training and funding, access to materials and equipment, and structures of distribution are all determinations that are dependant on highly specific cultural and economic contexts of production.

I had opted to concentrate my time at the screenings, reflecting my certainty that the symposium would be recorded and documented, whereas many of the films and videos



would not be guaranteed later distribution in Canada. In the final instance, the urgency of this distribution and visibility remains the central issue. What also emerged was the challenge of determining critical parameters for evaluation and discussion of these works and the range of issues addressed by them. The critical self-reflexivity induced by the vast range of factors begging consideration directly confronts common, so-called neutral technical, aesthetic and political criterion for evaluation in a provocative way, as have the (now highly complex) critical positions prompted by two decades of feminist cultural production with its reverberations throughout the humanities and other fields of knowledge.

The closing plenary session of the festival further heightened the underlying difficulties facing future production and distribution as well as the corresponding need to ensure that this event would be repeated. Not unlike the closing session at the *Encuentra* in *Pregnant with Dreams*, where a Nicaraguan radical feminist suggests the possibility of smaller, separate *Encuentras* to deal with more specific political needs (a suggestion made in light of the difficulties that vast differences and needs posed for practical problem-solving and strategy development), hundreds of women roared in disapproval, empowered as they were, by the strength of the solidarity

experienced quite in spite of contradiction and difference. Indeed, in celebration of contradiction and difference.

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Given the proliferation of influences to consider, it is impossible not to mention — if only briefly — the current legal quandary that is the unforeseen denouement to *In Visible Colours*. For as sadly ironic as it is, the celebratory outcome of the festival, and profits generated and allocated to a future festival, have been sidelined by a devastating financial conflict with Women In Focus (currently in administrative and executive turmoil as a result of this conflict), one of Canada's oldest women's resource and distribution centres out of which *In Visible Colours* co-founders, Zainub Verjee, and the National Film Board's Lorraine Chan, originally initiated and organized the event.<sup>2</sup>

A shorter version of this article was originally published in *C 25* (Spring 1990).

1 Loretta Todd, "Notes on Appropriation," *Parallelogramme* vol. 16, no. 1 (Summer, 1990), pp. 24-33.

2 A description of these conflicts was recently published by Nancy Pollak, "Visibly out of focus," *Kinesis* (June 1991), p. 5.

*The Displaced View* by Midi Onedera





# The Subaltern Body

A STUDY IN ETHICS, ALTERITY  
AND SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION

by Helen Lee

It is the voice (with which we identify the "rights" of the person) which communicates (communicates what? our — necessarily beautiful — soul? our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble... it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text.

Roland Barthes  
*Empire of Signs*

*Surname Viet Given Name Nam*  
by Trinh T. Minh-ha

If the undertaking of feminist cinema, like the work of anti-colonialism, is to be described as a project of oppositionality, the work of avant-garde and independent film and video can be regarded simply by its negative aesthetics. Arising from an analogous position in terms of the way she is defined in discourse, the figure of the subaltern woman and various configurations of the female body as the determining condition of her representability, visibility and identity, are the central concerns of this study. Understanding that identity is never pure but always relational and dependent on exterior, even prior relations, recent theoretical formulations in both materialist and psychoanalytic strains have been influential in breaking down the hitherto mutually exclusive terms of identity and difference — to the point of uncertainty, contingency





*Surname Viet Given Name Nam*  
by Trinh T. Minh-ha

If there exists a "discourse" which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective and social relations in gestures of confrontation and reappropriation, destruction and construction — productive violence, in short — it is "literature," or more specifically, the text.

Julia Kristeva  
*Revolution in Poetic Language*

Illuminated space is not the absolute interval. The connection between visual and touch, between representation and labor, remains essential... A meaningful world is a world in which there is the Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification... The passage to the rational is not a dis-individualization precisely because it is a language, that is, a response to the being who in a face speaks to the subject and tolerates a response, that is, an ethical act.

Emmanuel Levinas  
*Totality and Infinity*

and finally, unreadability. In response to this impasse of western consciousness and representation, contributions from feminist and postcolonial scholars and filmmakers have been most convincing. But the prohibitions of anti-positivist thought such as the negation of identity/self and the evacuation of political agency which have been useful in defining difference and oppression, also prove counter-productive to the aims of the work described here. The point is to find some commonality between these opposing views: one which proposes the impossibility of selfhood; and the other which insists on a definition of self and identity, not only as social construction but as political necessity.

Attributions of sexual and racial difference, so often ignored or overemphasized, are taken up in a variety of

"restagings" by four recent films. For a work such as *Adynata: Murder is Not a Story* (Leslie Thornton, 1983, USA) which emerges explicitly from the negative discourses of the avant-garde and anti-Orientalism, the negotiation of the self/other problematic engages a western version of subjectivity. Alternating from the purely imitative aspects of mimicry or verisimilitude, to Walter Benjamin's idea of "magical" mimesis, the film exposes the fragmentary nature of identity and identificatory processes, and the limits of a rational, liberal ideology and the "politically correct" representation. In *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989, USA), the identity/difference problematic is put forward as a process. The compatibility of western feminism and national socialism within the framework of politically intentioned art

and aesthetic invention becomes a question; although it is not a question of priority — politics or art — but one of hybridity: the political dimensions of artistic practice and the artfulness of political discourse. Central to this process is the problem of translation. As observed by Alice Jardine, the irony of this deconstructive task is that the negative or supplement which comes to be named feminine is valorized in the work of deconstructivists such as Jacques Derrida. The subsequent desire for the maternal body (as a lost presence or structured absence) as theorized by Julia Kristeva, will be one route explored with regard to feminine melancholia and the scenarization of the colonized indigenous female body in *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (Tracey Moffat, 1990, Australia). Finally, in *Two Lies* (Pam Tom, 1990, USA), I hope to suggest alternative ways of approaching questions of racial, sexual and cultural difference, and dimensions of subaltern existence not as an exercise in marginality but as one account of subjectivity, presence and the glowing recognition of narrational possibilities.

#### WESTERN EYE/ORIENTAL MIND: ADYNATA

The constitution of an Orientalist mind is one of the main themes of *Adynata*. Caricaturing this attitude, the film offers a challenge to prescribed notions of alterity, femininity, "correct" representations and identification. Establishing the art historical/vanishing perspective position of the (western) camera eye, the film opens with a series of tableaux which define its visual structure. The camera framings are reverential, monumental and historically marked: a stone building of unmistakably imperialist design and proportions; the stiff portrait of a 19th century Chinese mandarin and his wife; an

omniscient but telescopic view of a planet. Successively, this stable and coherent view and position of mastery is affirmed, disrupted, above all rendered visible: the optical penetration of the Chinese couple through close-up and intermittent flash frames (literally exposing the editing process through the film stock's exposure to light); the movie camera is lifted unceremoniously from the tripod, whisking away with it the image of the impressive-looking building; the picture of the observed planet begins to swoon to and fro, subject to the scrutinizing, fickle lens of western science. Thus, truth becomes relational to knowledge of the object and the limitations inherent in each subject position and its necessary specificity. For the white women ornamented in Oriental gear (played by the filmmaker, Thornton), the discomfort of the mime is revealed by a quick cutaway to the same women, seated and repositioned in the frame, this time bare of make-up and jewellery. This gesture also acknowledges a western prerogative (or rather, compulsion) and its unmitigating desire for the other, resulting in a crass sort of mimicry, a misconceived mimesis.

Although the film is in some ways about the limits of representability, *Adynata* concerns itself with more than an act of writing "under erasure," more than a simple orchestration of Orientalist motifs and their overturning. Outside the domain of epistemological models that inevitably err against the body and into negativity, there resides nonsensuous knowledge. Taking up these powerful fictions, the film revels in false projections of the Japanese garden, bizarre Hindi ritual, the Chinese satin show. These different Asian terms collide as a constructed kind of babble within a western framework of colonialist nostalgia and phantasy, exemplifying what Allen Weiss has described as a clash of "different symbolic systems." Writings about the Euro-American contextualization of ritual sacred objects from the Third World as "art" in the Paris exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, he argues:

Our model of detached aesthetic contemplation belies the original complex situatedness of these foreign ritual objects whose efficacy did depend upon profound — and most often exclusionary — initiatory systems. We discover here precisely the theoretical point of articulation between not so much different "Worlds," but rather different symbolic systems. As postmodernist criticism insists, the critical point is the hinge between local and universal — or at least universalizing — systems. Already, the notions of "anti-aesthetic" or "anti-Oedipus" (radical, contestatory, and destabilising as they may be) are but local systems of thought within our larger, but still local, system of ecumenical pretensions.<sup>(97)</sup>

Combining ethical principle with aesthetic regard, the point raises important issues for intercultural communication. In Gayatri Spivak's retheorization of the negative western

*Adynata* by Leslie Thornton





construction of Hindi communalism and the female subject in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she remarks on the British missionary attitude of "white men saving brown women from brown men." (121) In her study, the subaltern's intervention results in her demise: the young revolutionary woman commits suicide when she is menstruating so that the action cannot be read by her community as the compulsive act of a pregnant unmarried woman. Although the assertion of subaltern agency guarantees her destruction (with the double negative equalling a positive identity), the terms here are at least relocalized to the subaltern sphere. In *Adynata*, the recourse to a re-enchantment of Japanese gardens (the camera's blurred focus implying pre-historic vision and sensuous attachments) and our fantasies, is but one admission of the terms of western vision. Chinese footbinding, evoked through the skittish pantomime of a pair of women's hands and the frantic stitching of a shoe, is presented theatrically through the proscenium framing of the setpiece. Neither aesthetized nor reducible to an anti-aesthetic, the mime itself announces the alterity of silence and negativity. Though unverballed and without dialogue, this highly vocalized account exemplifies through disfigurement and an ethnically-inscribed wound the

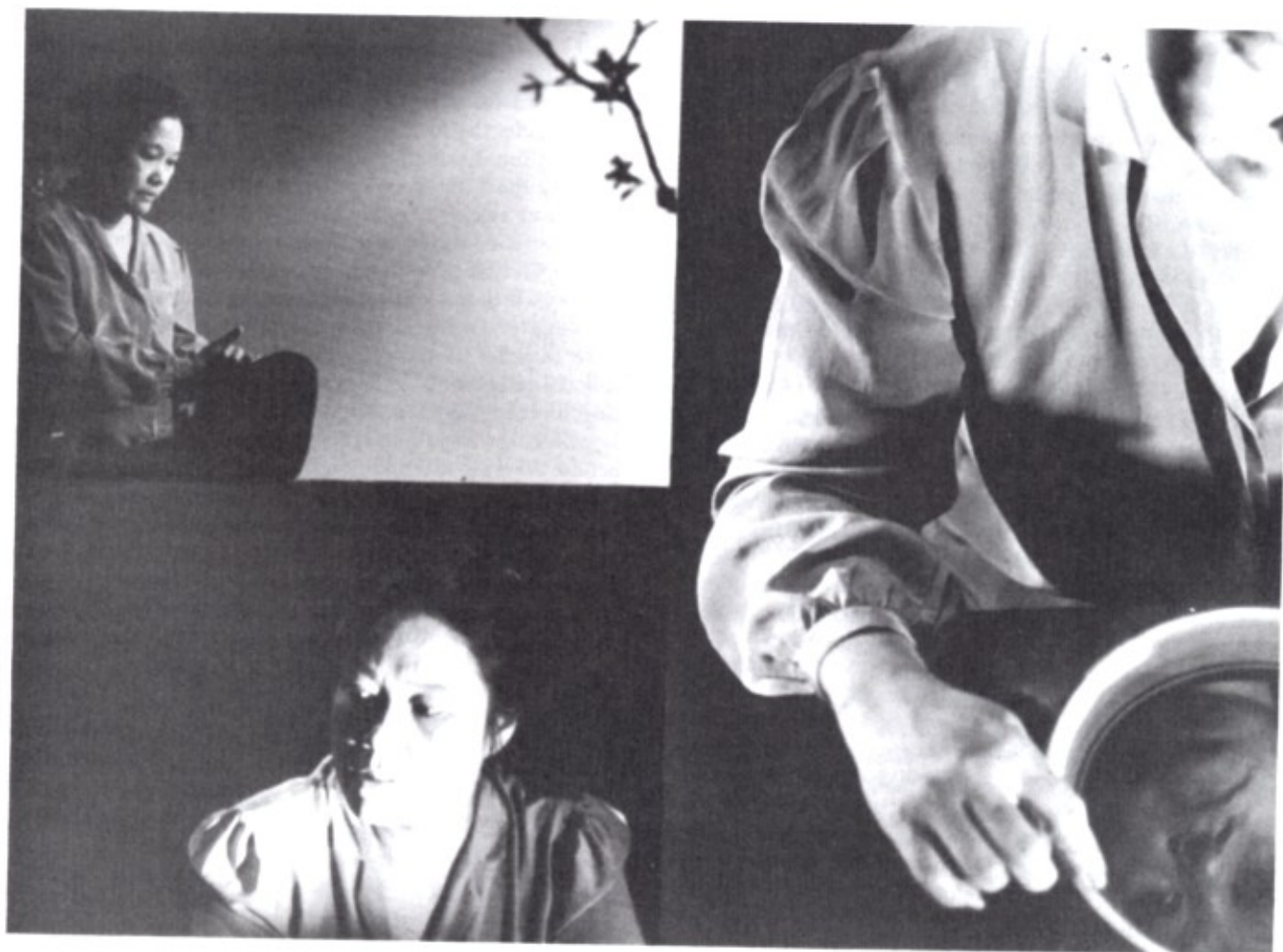
affective power of the muffled, sentenced female body. Still, the "impossibility" implied by its Greek title, *Adynata*, is a measure of the mimetic/alteric relation that assumes a (com)passionate, not knowledgeable, regard for the other. But "like a flash," the moment of coherence between the subjected body and the spectator's own is but limited to flashes.

#### THE SUBJECT ON TRIAL:

##### **SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM**

Memory, it has been said, is the only kind of metaphysics possible for (post)modernity and the age of anti-positivism. It is also through memories that, according to Freud, the libido is cathected to the object. (216) Using as a starting point, Annette Michelson's analysis of the mourning of the leader in Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin*, and the "process of historicization which transforms document into monument," (38) I would like to examine the ways in which the state is similarly memorialized in *SVGNN*. Like the Soviet female mourners belonging to various ethnic groups portrayed in the Lenin film, Vietnamese American women carry this responsibility since, as Michelson clearly spells out, "the work of mourning is women's work." (33) Her argument focuses on

*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* by Trinh T. Minh-ha





modernist reinventions of cinematic optical effects such as slow and reverse motion, looping and especially the free-frame in providing the photograph-like "kinetic icon" of Lenin essential to the acknowledgement of object-loss, mourning and the installation of a substitute. While some of these effects are featured in Trinh's films, other strategies are used that are more indicative of a postmodernist disposition. Also, the critical progress which Michelson characterized in Vertov's work as a shift from the magical to the epistemological function is signalled by another shift which I shall speculatively call the ethical. Most of the film's strategies involve a critique of the epistemological obsession for the object and while frustrating the desire for knowledge, they promote the idea of aesthetic choice (not as a way of preserving the modernist in postmodernism but) as both authorial inscription and as a problematic of the objectivity of documentary and the subjectivity of the spectatorial situation.

Foremost in *SVGN* is its critique of Vietnamese socialism from a feminist perspective. The imputed failure of the integration of the female proletariat into state discourse hinges on the existing terms of her relation to national identity. Structurally, nothing has changed for the woman under socialism. Instead of being married into the patrilineal family in accordance with Confucian doctrine, she is instead wedded to the state (hence, the film's title, referring to the name of South Asian origin which was chosen by national separatists who, in the interim between French colonialism and the U.S. invasion, sought to sever its ties to China.) Internationally contested, an understanding of the national identity of Viet Nam is variously translated by several women throughout the film. This process is not immune to the transliterative slip-pages and adjustments that occur when many different subjects with their own particularized histories take part in such a reconstructive process. As Trinh puts it, "Translation, like identity, is a question of grafting several cultures onto a single body." (8 Mayne) The interviews were originally conducted in 1978 by Mai Thu Van who, as a second-generation exile, came from France to Viet Nam specifically for that purpose. Published in 1982 as *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, the book was discovered a few years later by Trinh, who translated portions which were re-enacted in 1987 with Vietnamese women living in northern California. The film itself was completed in 1989. In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin writes that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original." (73 *Reflections*) Still, the test for the original (and the translated copy) is its translatability. (70) Challenging ideas of western leftism (especially anti-Vietnam war sentiments) about socialism and their presumed coincidence with the aims of feminism, the explicit demand for a reformulation of national identity with regard to gender formation seems to stretch the western idealist frame.

I wish to focus on the staged interviews in the first part of the film and, as guided by the film's structure, counterpose them with the "real" interviews of the latter part as a way of explicating this shift from epistemology to ethics. Demonstrating a postmodernist attitude toward the subject, the film's aesthetic strategies strive for neither a likeness to nor the essence of the original interviews. Drained of the emotional intent and spontaneity of a natural conversation (never

forgetting, Trinh reminds us, just how tactical speech really is), the talks take the form of a strangely impersonal personal testimony. Within the constraints of different cultural environments, however, each personal memory becomes acutely historical or particular to the conditions of both the event (the original event) and the memory (its reenactment). Marked by the duration of real time, the long takes plainly invoke the duress involved in both identity formation and the melancholic reminiscence of stately failure — the burden of women's work. The "obsessive rehearsal... repetition, deceleration, distension, arrest, release, and fixation" (38) described by Michelson which characterizes the work of mourning no longer represent, here, the textual effects of a modernist gesture. Rather, as symptoms, they constitute a variety of subject-effects and the interpellation of the subaltern position as a partial and fragmented process. The transcriptions of the interviews (monologues) as onscreen text, differing from the spoken version, emphasize the discrepancy between a readerly and writerly discourse, the difference between interpretation and experience. Unconventional framing choices and camera movements such as unmotivated close-ups, pans and dollies across the surface of their bodies question not so much their status as subjective personalities but their usually intended roles as objects of an objective discourse. Intervening sections of the film such as archival footage and photographs have certain areas of the frame masked so that, moments later, the initial framing choice is put into question, or in a relational position to the rest of the image. The evocation of *Kim Van Kieu* (*The Tale of Kieu*), a 19th century national epic poem, the interpretation of which changes through time and assaults the formation of national identity, underscores this relational understanding. As Marina Heung explains, "During the Vietnam war and its aftermath, her story was often read as epic allegory, so that she successively symbolized the denunciation of feudalism, the oppression under feudalism, resistance to American colonialism and, most recently, the exile of the Vietnamese from their homeland." (8) Also marking the cinematic process and the passage of historical time, Super-8 footage of women performing a Vietnamese folk dance is blown up to the 16mm gauge, with particles of dust on the image's surface remaining. The footage is optically printed in ways that accelerate, decelerate and freeze the action. Wearing full traditional dress and carrying the burden of tradition, the subaltern position is then reversed in the latter part of the film, where a contemporary image of the modern, that is (Vietnamese-)American woman emerges. However, the image is no longer naive, no longer invested in the same transparent truths of newsreels and the documentary. Questioning its relationship to the real, though still soliciting a spectator given over to absorption, these passages demand an involved critical viewing, but on ethical terms.

Based on difference, not identity, Trinh's conception of subaltern subjectivity is derived from both Buddhist philosophy and French poststructuralism. While she is one of her own best commentators, I wish to highlight that aspect shared by many theorists who advocate an inclusive practice, but one which still insists on the specificities of racial, cultural, sexual, class and gender difference and their particular points of emphasis at different times. "In the complex reality of post-





*Night Cries* by Tracey Moffatt

coloniality," Trinh writes, "it is therefore vital to assume one's radical 'impurity' and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying at least two, three things at a time." (7 Mayne) Extended to the politics and aesthetics of reading, note how texts will call upon difference as a way of negotiating a realizable subject position within discourse. Applied to the variously interpellated, translated subaltern body, the need for an attentive, ethically-informed spectatorial practice is that much more critical. In this sense, a consideration of the identity/difference problematic and its relation to spectatorial specificity and textual pleasure is just beginning.

#### THE MATERNAL BODY: NIGHT CRIES

In Derrida's critique of western metaphysics, tropes of the body play a crucial role in opening the text to a readerly response. Writing around the same period, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora as a capacity that exists before and alongside the functioning of symbolic language reinvigorates the concept of the subject. Since the latent semiotic material is physically manifested on the level of the body, the one link I would like to emphasize is this pervasive body, always feminine and hauntingly maternal. In *Night Cries*, the relations between the mother and daughter, the white body and the black body, are "scenarized" in various ways. A series of

frames illuminate the personal, cultural and performative dimensions of subaltern experience through the carefully wrought *mise-en-scene*, accentuated lighting and other visual codes. But these different textures come to assume a consistent, uniform tone, one characteristic of neurotic melancholia. Different from the mourning of the state's failure in *SVGN*, this melancholia is peculiar to the mother/daughter relation.

Like Kristeva's conception of the split subject (on trial, *en procès*), Derrida poses *difference* as a process, not a "truer" meaning. Offering terms such as the supplement, trace, blank, fold and the hymen as momentary, slippery interventions, his theory of dissemination rubs against the grain of solid, diligent hermeneutical understanding. A reinvention of Plato's original idea of mimesis as truth, such an account acknowledges the ways in which the space between time-honoured oppositions such as syntax and semantics and other dualisms begins to signify, by "marking the articulated opening of that opposition." (222) The trope of the hymen as that standing "between the inside and the outside of a woman," (213) between the womb and the world, reconfigures the force of the operation for Derrida. Caught between desire and pleasure (fulfillment), the perceptual play of the hymen frustrates oppositions by dislodging them from their privileged positions. Although positioned to preserve the distinction of the inside and outside, and to maintain that separation, the



hymen also allows passage and the commingling of fluids. As Mayne observes, "its very etymology denotes both union and separation." (45 *Keyhole*). Mayne notes the suppression of the homosexual/homotextual possibilities in the hymen's structure of a double play. This kind of elision which had characterized the theorization of masculine subjectivity and is maintained with Kristeva's thoughts on her own motherhood in "Sabat Mater," is reconfigured by the Irigarayan project of female hom(m)osexuality. Without recourse to transvestism (Mulvey) or masquerade (Mary Ann Doane), Irigaray draws on this primal connection between women, and specifically between daughter and mother. The female desire for the maternal body is complicated in *Night Cries* through the displacement of the biological black mother for the (infertile) white mother, and further elaborated through the complex of melancholia that suffuses the film's scenarization of loss and the imputed hysteria of the female subaltern.

The thematization of maternal separation and union in the film is one in which its deliberately artificial construction underscores the violence of that process. More than a (primal) scene, it is a (multiple) scenarization of disparate, conflictual, finally destructive elements. On an isolated Australian homestead, a middle-aged Aboriginal woman cares for her dying, adoptive white mother with barely contained rage. In the ironic reversal of the maternal (mother/infant) and paternal (white colonizer/Aborigine) functions, she feeds and cleans the old woman, washes her clothes, wheels her to the out-house and watches over her disturbed sleep. The film narrates this (s/m)othering process with great acuity, with the mother finally occupying the place of radical interior/exteriority.

Displayed as the monstrous offspring of colonialism and genocide, the white mother/black daughter coupling engendered by forced assimilation policies in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s typify a relationship of "cruelty and destruction" that is the endpoint of rational discourse. (233 Horkheimer/Adorno) Here, the maternal register is short-circuited in one operative sweep, suggesting the mother's ultimate infertility and the uncertainty of civilizing primitive nature (the taming of the wild night's cries). The artificially conceived and dis/inseminated project, like the copy without an original, is denied the sense of a procreative spirit or original inspiration, the nature of natural conception. The use of post-synchronous sound demonstrates the artifice involved in its reconstruction and the interruption necessary for political and aesthetic intervention and change. On the precipice of nature and civilization, the homestead setting supplies a myriad of sounds that connote the domestic (the creak of the porch door) and the wild (simultaneously jungle and desert). Gradually, drumming sounds and the call of the wild, alternately animal and human-sounding, come to overtake the soundtrack. By the film's climax, different visual and discursive levels including the childhood memory/re-enactment and the Aboriginal Christian singer's performance, come to be sutured into the main narrative frame. This process is then broken by the off-screen sound of a terrible thunderbolt. The sonoric qualities of the drums and cries evoke ceremony, ritual and death, not to mention the libidinal economy associated with narrational strategies, especially on the level of sound.

The drum is contrasted with the sterility of oxygen tubes, the putrid exhalation of old, white breath and the terror of a newborn's cry and its misconceived birth. With regard to spectatorship and narrational processes, the film's climax and denouement facilitate a kind of release and reconciliation for the viewer. The spellbinding suturing effect (which occurs on the level of sound and is characteristically broken by the thunderstorm), proves enabling to a subaltern consciousness in a process not unlike the constructed cause-and-effect scenario described by Spivak. The specifically textual effects of the film's visual and aural elements are encoded on the spectatorial body in ways that define the centrality and marginality of subaltern discourse, both its tragic and pleasurable elements.

Finally, the subaltern figure in *Night Cries* embodies a figure of loss, the melancholic body of the female indigene. The daughter's mourning of her mother's death, though associated with object-loss, is also culturally ascribed as the legacy of colonialism and the territorialization of the native body. With respect to Irigaray's rereading of Freud's male economy in his account in "Mourning and Melancholia" according to the woman-to-woman and specifically mother/daughter connection, the passivity and love/hate relation that characterized the melancholic little girl's relationship to her mother is also extendable to a racially subaltern position and the mindset of the colonized. Irigaray describes the loss this way:

[The] devaluation of the mother accompanies or follows on the devaluation of the little girl's own sex organ. Thus in her case the relationship to the (lost) object is not simple but complicated by conflict and ambivalence that remain unconscious...that no language, no system of representations will replace, or assist... Which may result in their being "remembered" in the form of "somatic affections that are characteristic of melancholia? And also, of course, of hysteria..."(68)

Quite literally, it is only during sleep, and death, that the narrative of the daughter in *Night Cries* is released to other discursive levels. Taking the form of phantasy and (rear screen) projection, the *mise-en-scene* of the film recalls or "remembers" both its historical antecedents and the cinematic ones. *Jedda*, the first colour film produced in Australia, is variously quoted and restaged in this reappropriation of the "tragic mulatto" scenario. The little Aboriginal girl, easily corruptible to native ways in explicitly sexual terms (the Aboriginal boys whom she plays with by the beach denoting this threat), becomes reattached to the white mother. Doing so displaces her ethnic Aboriginal origin and her developmental sexual identity onto the overburdened position of the mother. Only through the mother's death is it perceived that the daughter, now middle-aged (implying both fecundity and menopause), is able to function autonomously, extricated from daughterly obligation.

#### AN ETHICAL REGARD: TWO LIES

How would one begin to speak about ethics in our position as spectators of cinema? It would seem that in a modern concep-





*Two Lies* by Pam Tom

tion of the term, ethics would be opposed to epistemology and politics. In his recent talk, "Cultural Power and the Struggle for Hegemony" (October 1990), Stuart Hall spoke on behalf of ethics and the need for such a system of ideas. In this period where theories of cultural discourse seem morally evacuated, withered and lacking the instrumentality needed for political change, he argues for a reinvention of the subject based on an ethical system. Different from an oppositional practice which posits the hegemonic hold of the enemy as the precondition for intervention, ethics provides a different rationale for intervening — some solid ground. In Hall's version, an ethical system offers a double to epistemology, but is decidedly political in character and purpose. Still, the conception is lacking in definition (due in no small part to the fact that it is new and still in formulation). The clearest example he provides is the one of choice as an assertion of ethical belief. He asks, "What is the terrain on which I am trying to make a difference?". Hall puts the question to calcified leftist thought and the insistent us/them bifurcation, instead of the formulation of a strategic ethics of political practice. Again, the persistent binarism of social structures incapacitates the inferior relation of the subaltern as a potential agent of social discourse.

Given this urgent political need, Emmanuel Levinas is an enigmatic figure, whose theories of otherness seem to defy western metaphysics, phenomenology and anti-humanist discourse at each turn. In proposing an ethics of alterity, Levinas insists upon the renunciation of self as a precondition to subjectivity. Based on the utmost exteriority, excess, infinity and activity (meaning the subject's passivity) of the other, his the-

ory envisions a turn from logos to mythos, epistemology to ethics, the true to the good — or rather a reprioritizing of the terms. Affirming the limits of a modern *cogito*, one's obligation and responsibility to the other provides the basis for subjectivity, is indeed dependent upon it. The priority remains with the other. For Levinas, writes Elizabeth Grosz, "Alterity is always prior to identity and the binary divisions between subject and object." (37) Through shared themes of sacrifice, Levinas offers the figures of the hostage and the mother as those bearing the unconditional response and responsibility for the other.

Focusing on the idea of vision and visualization, I would like to frame my discussion of *Two Lies* around the redoubtable maternal figure, whose alteric relation to the daughter reinvigorates the subaltern body, gives it coporeal affect and weight, and affirms its irremediable otherness. By speaking its name, "two lies," the daughter, whose subjectivity is positioned as a possibility throughout the film, comes into identity through difference (set apart from her mother but also the same), and an ethical basis for understanding her subaltern position.

The body, the "unsignifiable" and repressed body, represents for many theorists the unsaid and unsayable. But I would like to argue that it is only through the female body and the body of the text that the repressed material is enunciated. Returning to Kristeva, recall that she privileges the poetic text and its departures from lexical rules and strictures as a measure of its revolutionary potential. These grammatical deviations and syntactical play depend upon the body. Semiotic processes are registered through elocution and its

attempts at articulation, so that no matter how muffled and partial, the meaning is quite clear. Posing a danger in exposing the insufficiency of symbolic language, the body appeals to mimetic, sensuous and semiotic processes that are excessive of symbolic order. In the most productive approach to the emergence of the body, we can say that the definition of language itself is expanded.

In *Two Lies*, the body both narrates the available positions (naive, knowing, fallen), and is itself narrated by a master narrative. Three characters in the film represent the possible positions of the innocent body (Esther, the youngest daughter), the knowledgeable body (Mei, the older daughter), and the corrupted body (Doris, the mother). The story of these three different bodies, modelled on the conflict structure of western narrative, may be viewed as the problem of grafting the narrational possibilities of separate entities onto the body of one filmic text. But one other subjective presence animates the film, that of the author and the politics of cultural identity. More than the other three films in which authorial intention is more ambiguously positioned with regard to subaltern subjectivity, identity is assumed, *a priori*. The mother, functioning negatively in this regard, represents the (non-)identity of the Asian American woman. On narrative terms, the eyelid operation the divorced mother undergoes to make herself more appealing to white men is perceived as a denial, the refusal of racial difference. But on an ethical level, her actions may be read as a kind of sacrifice.

In Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the female protagonist takes her life under similar circumstances of an ethical choice. The mother's ethical decision in the film is to fulfill her gender role, not her maternal one. This ensures the daughter's renunciation of the mother, the daughter's arrival into subjecthood, and the final reconciliation. This change is presented in a process of visualisation in the film. Throughout, the mother is presented without sight, wearing bandages across her eyes. Still, the gauzed, partially obscured gaze when she greets her daughters and reveals the operation is from her point of view. The two girls stare into her eyes, which occupies the position of the camera. In this sense, the mother represents vision and non-vision. This critical look is returned by Mei after her mother reveals her wounded eyes. In the last shot of the film, Mei readjusts the rearview car mirror. Changing the focus from what was a view of her mother sleeping in the backseat to herself, now occupying the driver's seat and not coincidentally the position of the camera, Mei becomes the beholder of vision — but no less beholden to the mother. The final shot, extended in time by a freeze-frame, provides a look of unmistakable self-recognition, bittersweet in its knowledge of a realized and defined subjectivity, but also deferred to the other whose alterity is irrefutable.

For Levinas, one's proximity to the face of the other and its undeniable alterity is both humbling and enabling for self-hood. He writes, "We can speak of enjoyment or of sensation, in the domain of vision and audition, when one has seen or heard much, and the object revealed by the experiences is steeped in the enjoyment — or suffering — of pure sensation." (187) This process of subjectivity, its effacement and the effects of the text upon the body offers a compelling model for spectatorship, particularly with regard to the ever-fluctu-

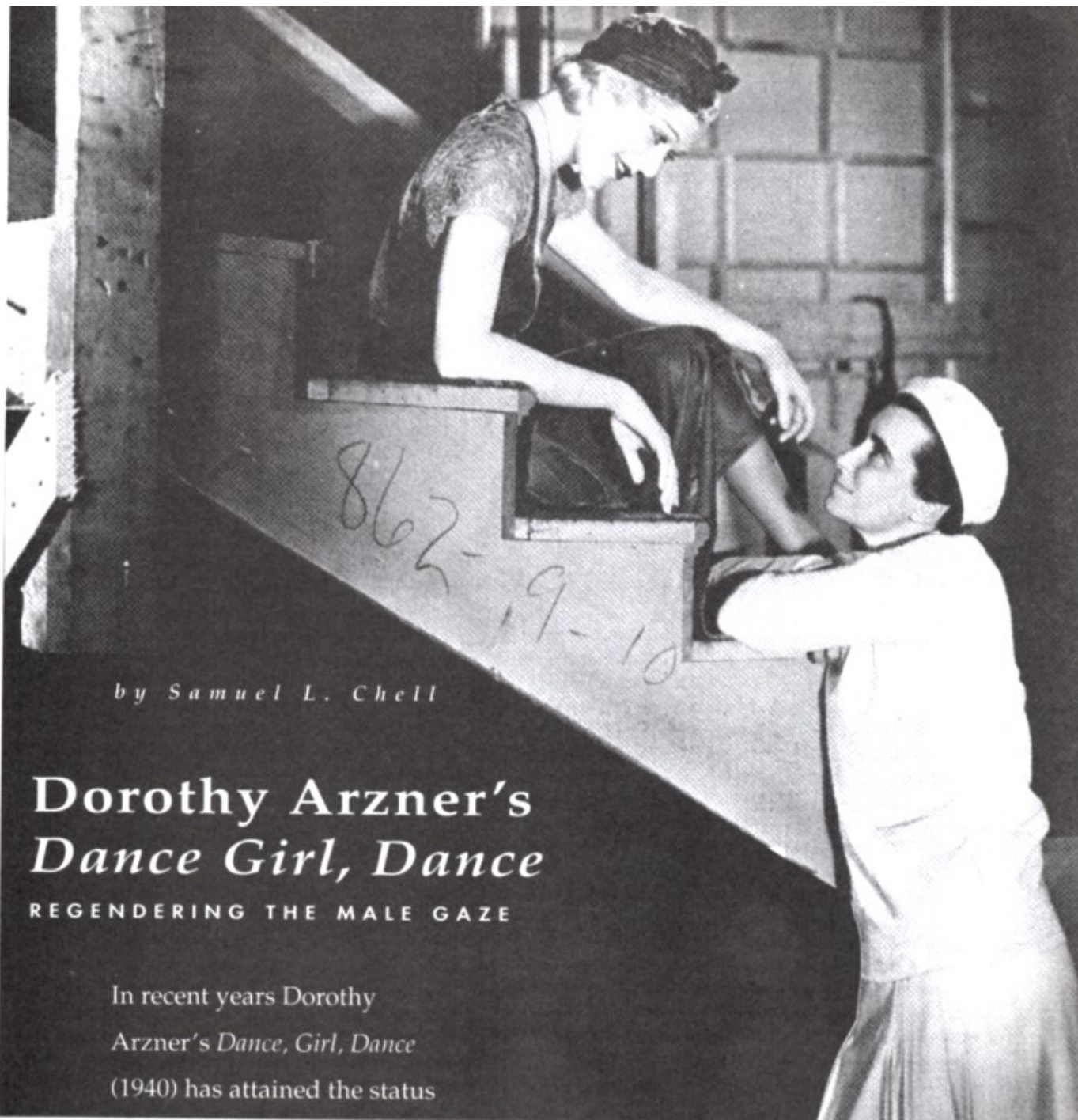
ating subaltern position which is sometimes centrally placed, but more often not. It speaks to the pleasures, sometimes painful pleasures of watching cinema, and those fleeting moments of coherence.

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by Samuel L. Chell

## Dorothy Arzner's *Dance Girl, Dance*

REGENERATING THE MALE GAZE

In recent years Dorothy  
Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance*  
(1940) has attained the status

of a feminist cult film, a classic  
Hollywood text that manages  
manages to be "progressive"  
in going against the grain of a  
system in which the suppres-  
sion of the discourse of the  
woman is normally a given.<sup>1</sup>

Arzner (right) with unidentified actress

Concerning the relationship of the two main female characters, an aspiring ballerina (Maureen O'Hara) and a vampish burlesque queen (Lucille Ball), Molly Haskell writes, "Ms. Arzner captures with peculiar force the emotional reality of the women, independently and in their relationship as roommates and rivals" (147). Haskell's comment marks one of the strengths separating *Dance, Girl, Dance* from its covert "remake," *Flashdance* (1983),<sup>2</sup> but it falls short in addressing the film's singular position not only among classic



Hollywood film texts but within Arzner's oeuvre as well.

Claire Johnston comes closest to identifying the special claim of *Dance, Girl, Dance* upon feminist criticism with the observation that "it is only in this film that Arzner examines the question of woman as spectacle in patriarchy" (40.) Feminist film criticism has repeatedly argued that classic Hollywood cinema requires its women on screen to sacrifice their own gaze to that of a male protagonist and, even in the so-called "woman's film," constructs its spectator as a generic *he*.<sup>3</sup> While all of Arzner's films challenge and attempt to subvert the dominance of the patriarchal order, *Dance, Girl, Dance* is unique in directly confronting and explicitly indicting the male gaze that contains woman in film by defining her as erotic object.<sup>4</sup>

Of special importance is the scene, celebrated by Johnston and other feminist critics, in which Judy O'Brien, the ballet dancer, angrily chastizes her male spectators in a burlesque theatre (thereby implicating the spectator of the film as well) for staring at a woman undressing in order to imagine themselves the stronger sex. It is, according to Johnston, the only moment in Arzner's work when a decisive break occurs between "the dominant patriarchal discourse and the discourse of the woman" (42). Yet the break, Johnston continues, is only momentarily supreme, as the applause of the audience for Judy's courageous action immediately returns it to the arena of spectacle. Although Johnston acknowledges that Arzner's subversive ending does not completely efface the feminine voice since Judy's "rescue" by a male is depicted ironically as a defeat, it is nonetheless a largely repressed and silent feminine discourse with which we are left in this reading of the film.

The case for *Dance, Girl, Dance* as a triumphant feminist film project becomes stronger once we examine more closely the way in which the film constructs the male gaze. In fact, Arzner's film is so successful at subverting its dominance that feminist critics, accustomed to the relegation of women in film to silence and marginality, have tended to overlook the field of vision that traditionally has invited their closest scrutiny — the peripheral screen space, which in this case harbours not a feminine but a patriarchal presence. Since *Dance, Girl, Dance* thematically revolves around the ideology of woman as spectacle, it is understandably tempting to type all the males in the film as bearers of the gaze that, through alignment with the operations of the cinematic apparatus, would objectify and dominate women. However, Arzner represents sexual difference and the male gaze as sufficiently complex to resist reductive interpretation and dismissal.

Relations among women in the film are based on a fairly obvious dualistic structuring of the male gaze. On the one hand, Bubbles, the exhibitionist with "oomph," devours and exploits it, soon enjoying the attentions of a wealthy patron in the "artificial limb business." Judy, on the other hand, is willing to deflect the gaze away from herself to Bubbles until humiliation is transformed to indignation. Sensing that men stare at women in order to assert power over them through a kind of fetishistic dismemberment, Judy not only implicates her spectators as co-actors but passes judgment on their performances as well: "You play at being the stronger sex. But your wives see through you."

Thus, Bubbles and Judy interpret their role within patriarchal society in terms of familiar oppositions — strong/weak, dominant/submissive, subject/object, spectator/spectacle, consumer/commodity — in which the woman occupies the place of the second, inferior term. Arzner's camera, however, resists this binary division by representing the male gaze as tripartite.

At the most basic level is the lecherous look employed by the nightclub owner who rejects Judy's audition but immediately registers voyeuristic approval of Bubbles' provocative "oomph." Clearly his interest in Bubbles has been heightened by the failure of the preceding performance. By extension he represents the majority of the burlesque house patrons, whose arousal will be assured by Judy's preceding ballet routine, which Bubbles, understanding the principle of enhancing pleasure by postponing it, has incorporated into her act. If Judy represents the threat of woman-artist or, even worse, of guilt-inducing maternal transcendence, Bubbles is the welcome relief that serves as the trigger and object of pent-up male desire.

At a higher and therefore even more patronizing level is the gaze of Steve Adams (Ralph Bellamy), the ballet impresario who falls in love with Judy's innocent woman-image. Riding down in an elevator with Judy, he casts sidelong glances that are clearly no less self-serving for having a protective and paternal rather than an erotic or deviant basis. It is not Judy's body but her psyche that Steve's gaze undresses. (He will confess to her, "When I reached the ground floor, I felt as if I knew you well," though she will have no idea of his

1. In referring to "woman's discourse" within the film text, I am following most feminist film theorists in not limiting the term to specific vocal utterances. Rather it refers to the feminine voice in the larger sense of woman's viewpoint and desire for self-expression as well as her ideological and political position within the social order.

2. Despite the numerous likenesses between the two films — the aspiring ballerina who appears to compromise her ideals, the aged mentor whose death inspires the protégé, the male benefactor who gives the talented hopeful her chance — the differences are more instructive. Compared to the earlier film, the later is pure fantasy, the total wish fulfillment of its heroine who, unimpeded by male opposition, expresses herself exactly as she pleases throughout the film. The bar in which she moonlights as an erotic dancer is no "girlie joint" but a modern-dance studio featuring sophisticated sets and choreography. If *Flashdance* is, as many critics originally contended, exploitative of women, it is not of their bodies.

3. For discussions of the "male gaze" in cinema see, for example, Kaplan, pp.23-35, and Doane, pp.1-13.

4. *Christopher Strong* (1934) invites the closest comparison with *Dance, Girl, Dance* since flying has much the same significance for its aviatrix-heroine (Katherine Hepburn) as dancing has for Judy O'Brien. Although both activities serve as metaphors for the expression of feminine desire, dancing most directly involves the problematic issue of film's representation of woman as spectacle. Moreover, as Jacqueline Suter has pointed out, when the heroine of *Christopher Strong* kills herself she sacrifices desire to duty, thereby silencing the feminine voice and insuring its total usurpation by the patriarchal order.





Maureen O'Hara with Maria Ouspenskaya

identity until the film's concluding scene.)

When Steve locates Judy at the burlesque house, he is the only spectator who prefers Judy's act to Bubbles'. Although Arzner's singling out of Steve's devouring gaze aligns it with the voyeuristic looks of the other consumers, Steve feels himself exempt from Judy's castigation of the audience. In fact, Judy's denunciation of males who "play at being the stronger sex" gives way to his attempt at total domination of her in the final scene: "Now listen to me you silly child... You've had your own way long enough — now you're going to listen to me."

In the embrace between the two, the film's closing shot, Arzner's camera pulls in tight on Judy's face to show the same wistful expression that had lingered there in an earlier scene when Judy in private wished upon the morning star for a successful career as a dancer. Steve's look is finally excluded from the frame because Judy sees no obligation to return it.

The fragmentation of Steve's body here recalls the first direct meeting between the pair. Judy had dropped her bus fare down a grate and the camera cut from her kneeling figure to the legs of Steve, before tilting upward to the rest of his anatomy. The effect is to objectify Steve, whose controlling gaze is ultimately subverted by Judy's and the director's unwillingness to give it a face. He will become the tool through which Judy will realize her desire of becoming an artist since dancing, as she has confessed, means everything to her. The film's conclusion, then, does not foreclose Judy's independence,<sup>5</sup> even if it undeniably places conditions upon it. The game of sexual superiority, which she had been quick to see through and denounce, may not be so easy to renounce. If men play at being the stronger sex and fail, Judy can play the weaker sex and, to the degree that she succeeds (i.e., that Steve fails to see through her act), lay claim to the strength she found wanting in men.



So far my analysis of the male gaze in *Dance, Girl, Dance* has revealed two forms, both efforts to assert control over the woman. On the one hand, we have the scopophilia practiced by Bubbles' fans, the classic form of fetishism activated by the fear of sexual difference, or castration. The objectified woman-image for them is a surrogate mother figure. But since she is free of incest taboos, she serves to free up the male desire by removing the fear of reprisal. On the other hand is Steve's dominating, possessive look; for him Judy is the innocent child-figure upon which he imagines he may work his will. Structured along sadistic lines, Steve's gaze penetrates and tames the free-spirited, inscrutable world of the woman-child, it demystifies her while asserting its own patriarchal privilege.

In her widely quoted, highly influential article, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey distinguishes between the male looks of fetishism and voyeurism, implicating Sternberg in the former and Hitchcock in the latter. Arzner's film employs both looks and, while not denying their complicity in the exploitation of women, distinguishes between the manipulative gaze practiced by naughty little boys and the dominant perspective of paternal hegemony.

In spite of the film's representation of both, neither look is shown to be totally dominating or oppressive. Judy's submission to Steve, as I have suggested, is subverted by Arzner's *mise-en-scène*. And although Bubbles' identity and success appear dependent upon the erotic and fetishizing properties of the male gaze, her keen and aggressive abilities at marketing herself as a commodity blur the distinction between exploited and exploiter, lending some force to the landlady's envious tribute, "I always did think you were the smartest of the lot." Moreover, when Bubbles props up the intoxicated body of Jimmy Harris (Lou Hayward) in front of a camera and announces her imminent marriage to "it," she demonstrates that she, no less than her male customers, is capable of treating human beings as objects.

But *Dance, Girl, Dance* goes even further to insure that the woman's discourse will be triumphant despite the normally stifling effects of a male gaze. It achieves this singular position in classic Hollywood cinema through the development of the character of Jimmy Harris who will represent a liberating alternative to the operations of voyeurism and fetishism.

The mutually-empowering look which Jimmy shares with Judy is pervasive throughout the thematic text as well as the director's *mise-en-scène*. At first it presents itself to the two characters and the film's spectator as a conventional romantic look. Jimmy compares Judy to the morning star and comments on her blue eyes, which return his gaze with unguarded desire. Gradually it becomes clear, however, that the blue eyes are important to Jimmy because they represent the relationship he once enjoyed with the wife Elinor he is about to

divorce. Jimmy in turn, is important to Judy because he recognizes and cares about her potential as an artist. He alone understands her exclusive devotion to dancing as the desire for self-expression, and he alone sees through and dismantles the facade of woman as spectacle.

The difference of Jimmy's gaze from that of other men is marked in the film's opening shot. Training on a rooftop sign advertising the Harris Tire Corporation, the camera descends to the dark streets of Akron, Ohio and tracks into the night club where Bubbles, Judy and six other dancers are members of a kickline hired to entertain the customers who are not engaged in illicit gambling. The next shot is of Jimmy Harris at a table, visibly discomfited by the flickering shadows cast by the spotlights on the dancers. When Bubbles reverses the usual spectator-spectacle priority by leering and winking at Jimmy, he disgustedly hides his face behind a lamp shade on his table. Only when Judy stands up to the police who have raided the club does Jimmy take notice, representing her viewpoint to the chief officer: "How would *you* like to dance your feet off for a jaded public?"

Jimmy's empathy and support are further established when he waltzes with Judy. The camera frames their rotating heads in a long take, fully disclosing the unbroken reciprocity of their shared gaze. From this point on Judy will dedicate her desire not so much to Jimmy as to the image of the morning star his eyes reflect back to her. She creates an artistic dance sequence which she names "Morning Star" and, despite her teacher's remonstrances ("Stop! Where can I sell a morning star? They want Bubbles!"), remains true to her artistic vision, projecting her dreams of being her own dancer upon the night's last shining star. Just as Judy's look finally penetrates and frees the tormented Jimmy of his self-deception concerning his wife ("You're still in love with her. I knew it as soon as I saw her blue eyes"), Jimmy's look returns and deepens Judy's desire for expression, the part of herself incapable of being compromised or exploited.

In opposition to the opening shot's descending motion from the lofty illuminated sign announcing Jimmy Harris' affluence to his shadowy, defeated figure, the camera introduces Steve Adams by tilting upwards from the lowly perspective of Judy on the street to his imposing penthouse dance studio, a phallogocentric movement that will later be repeated when Judy confronts the figure of Steve himself. At no point does she share his look, which is always depicted as privately held, separate and superior. In the film's penultimate scene, following the trial of Judy for disturbing the peace at the burlesque theatre, she meets Steve's hungry gaze with suspicion and non-ambivalent rejection. Only when she discovers his real identity as the famous dance impresario does she resign herself to his protective embrace, while still refusing to share his look.

The only mutually shared gaze in *Dance, Girl, Dance* is that of Judy and Jimmy. All of the other looks — those of Steve, Bubbles, Elinor, the spectators at the burlesque show — are exclusively possessed, private glances that serve as reminders of the inability of individuals to constitute the Other in terms of an equal, mutually enabling relationship. By contrast, Arzner repeatedly uses shot/reverse-shot set-ups of Jimmy and Judy that not only establish the equality of their gaze but,

5. Concerning the final scene, Pam Cook writes, "Judy 'gets what she wants' at the expense of any pretensions to 'independence' she had" (48). Lucy Fischer takes a similar dim view of the ending, finding it "regrettable...Judy winds up with Steve Adams" (154). But the point of the final scene, as I read Arzner's *mise-en-scène*, is that Judy will salvage her independence because of her pretensions to dependence.



in effect, "suture" the viewer to the dynamic, privileged position of their relationship within the filmic narrative.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of this strategy the director produces within the viewer a tension between the match felt as desirable (Jimmy/Judy) vs. the problematic pairings that will occur (Steve/Judy, Bubbles/Jimmy, Jimmy/Elinor). But the *mise-en-scène* of the shared gaze in this film stands for more than compatible relationships or mutually reciprocated desire. It goes to the very heart of the distinction the film posits between art and spectator.

From the opening scene, Judy articulates the divide between her desires as an artist and the requirements of a jaded public, whose satisfaction she can justify only in terms of getting paid. Judy's dance teacher, Madame Basilova (Maria Ouspenskaya) is a former ballet star unable to shield her pupil from cynicism: "What a life for an artist... You I could maybe teach but, no, a flesh peddler I must be." Following her first turn at playing "stooge" for Bubbles, Judy views her image in the dressing room mirror with self-contempt. Her preferred dancing is an expression of pure desire rather than its consummation, a postponement of gratification enabling the imagination to scale morning star heights. As spectacle, however, she is reduced to repressing desire and postponing pleasure in order merely to heighten the gratification provided by Bubbles.

Again, it is Jimmy who recognizes the gulf between art and spectacle, between the agent of vision and its mere object. He comes to Judy's defense in the opening scene because he senses the dedication that drives her to dance even under the most compromising circumstances. Unlike Steve, whose attraction to Judy is solely to her physical person, to woman as object, Jimmy's sympathies are with the performer as expressive artist. When he leaps on the burlesque stage in Judy's defence a second time, he does not even know whom he is defending.

Ironically Jimmy's failure to recognize Judy in this scene emphasizes the degree to which they see eye to eye. Theirs is not merely a shared vision about human desire and the ability to surmount problems traceable to sexual difference. They share in common with the director an understanding of the position of the woman/artist who is driven to find a voice in opposition to forces that seek its silence. Once dismissed by mainstream critics as a minor "B-picture" with some scene-stealing moments by Lucille Ball, *Dance, Girl, Dance* is Dorothy Arzner's signature film, a compelling revisionary text not simply in its foregrounding of the discourse of the woman but in its subversion of the "male gaze" — through the gaze of the male.

6. The much-discussed "suture" theory, which uses the shot/reverse-shot figure of classic cinema to exemplify the way in which film seals the viewing subject within its chain of images, rarely evokes a positive response from feminist critics. But the powerful mechanism that characteristically forces spectators to see only the masculine point of view can, as Arzner's work frequently demonstrates, be used to promote identification with the feminine viewpoint.

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# Criticism

OR

# Complicity

*The Accused*, an American film made in 1988 and directed by Jonathan Kaplan (*Project X*, *Heart Like a Wheel*), uses the representation of the rape of a woman by a group of men as its structuring principle, both in terms of narrative and form. As a classic realist text, *The Accused* adheres closely to what theorists such as Peter Wollen describe as the tenets of classical realism: narrative transitivity, identification, transparency, closure and pleasure.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Colin

## THE QUESTION OF THE TREATMENT OF RAPE AND RAPE VICTIM IN JONATHAN KAPLAN'S *THE ACCUSED*

by Mallorie Cook

MacCabe points out in relation to the classic realist text, there is "a level of contradiction into which the...text can enter" that may allow it to be read as progressive, this being the contradiction between "the dominant discourse of the text and the dominant ideological discourse of the time."<sup>2</sup> *The Accused* attempts to enter this level of contra-

diction. It proposes a moral challenge to the spectator by focusing on and graphically depicting the rape of a 'sexually transgressive woman' and exploring the question of personal accountability with respect to sexual violence. The film's admirable intentions, however, are frequently undermined by the film's formal structure which serves to construct and hold the spectator as moral subject, allowing for no active production of meaning on the part of the spectator. Held as passive moral subject, the spectator is required only to 'consume' the established meaning of the text, the "knowledge ready-made in a dominant discourse."<sup>3</sup> It is such fixation of the subject that renders *The Accused* ultimately problematic. In attempting to formally contain the devastating subject matter it addresses, *The Accused* undermines any alienating or ideologically dislocating effect that the representation of a violent

1. Peter Wollen, "Goddard and Counter-Cinema: Vent d'Est," *Readings and Writings*, London, Verso, 1982, p.79.

2. Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses," *Screen*, 15, 2 (Summer 1974), p.16.

3. Ibid., p.25

Jodie Foster in Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused*







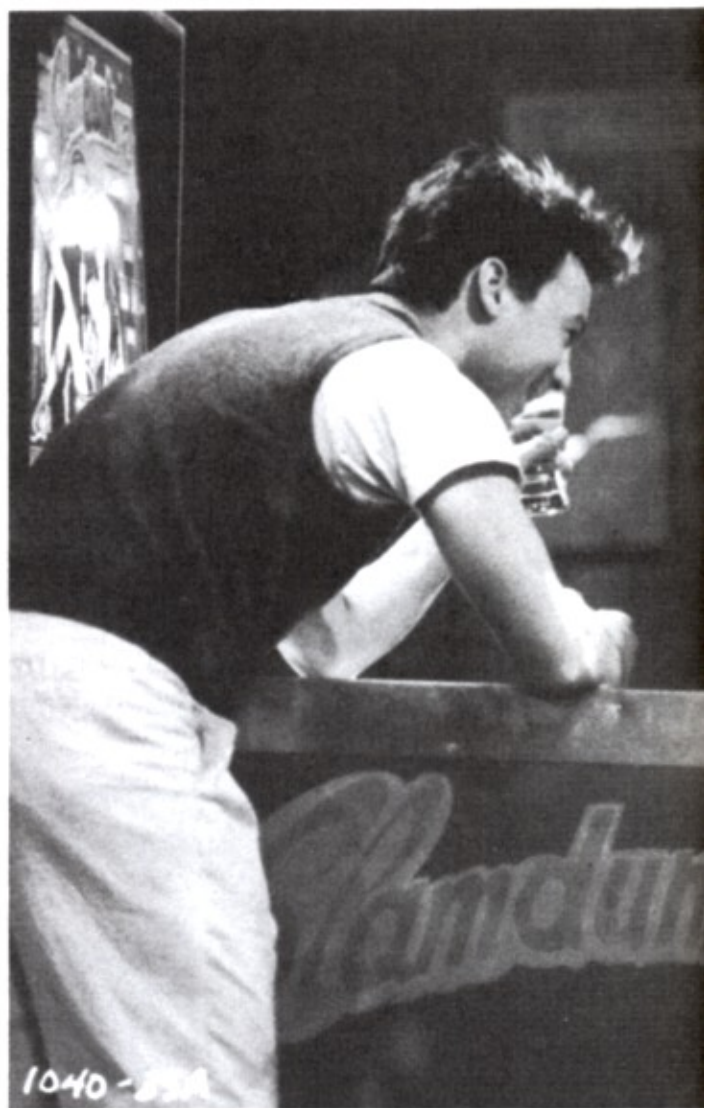
crime against a woman might inherently have.

*The Accused* is a fictional film<sup>4</sup> with the following plot: a pot-smoking, heavy-drinking, sexually aggressive woman, Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster), is held down on a pinball machine in a bar and raped by three men. Sarah Tobias' attackers are arrested, and Sarah's lawyer Kathryn Murphy (Kelly McGillis) plea bargains with the defense such that the rapists are convicted on charges less serious than first degree rape. This outrages Sarah, who feels that because of her transgressive lifestyle she has been stigmatized as an unreliable and even detrimental witness and is thus prevented from relating her version of the incident. After Sarah is injured in a confrontation with one of the men who encouraged the rape, Kathryn Murphy experiences something of an epiphany and decides to prosecute the three men in the bar who encouraged the rape for criminal solicitation. Her case depends on the testimony of Kenneth Joyce (Bernie Coulson), a college friend of one of the rapists, witness to the rape, and the first to alert the police (in an anonymous phone call). Kenneth, although initially hesitant, agrees to testify, and the accused men are convicted.

*The Accused* is what Molly Haskell describes as a "sympathetic" rape film, falling somewhere in between the "exploitation fantasies of lust and revenge in which a woman 'gets hers' and corroborates the idea that women ask for it" and the small documentaries "which describe first hand horrors and are seen only by women."<sup>5</sup> The sympathetic rape film attempts to convey a didactic message to a mass audience by using transitive narrative and high-profile actors;<sup>6</sup> such films must be, in principle, commercially viable without compromising the integrity of the message. Such, it seems, were the aims of Kaplan in *The Accused*, yet while the film was relatively successful commercially,<sup>7</sup> its 'message' is compromised by the film's overdetermination of narrative conventions.

On the level of its dialogic discourse, *The Accused* addresses the issue of the institutional oppression of the rape victim. Sarah Tobias says repeatedly that she wants to tell her story; she wants to legitimize her voice as woman and victim in the eyes of those institutions that regard her testimony as illegitimate because of her transgressive lifestyle. The rhetoric of Kathryn Murphy's summation of her criminal solicitation case reiterates the issue; she responds forcefully to the defense attorney's assertion that Sarah Tobias' testimony is "nothing" — the legitimacy of Sarah's testimony is, in fact, the basis of Kathryn Murphy's legal argument.

A second level of discourse in the film, articulated by means of the film's formal structure, serves to undermine the didacticism of the film's dialogic discourse. *The Accused* is structured so as to privilege the visible — objective 'truth' is defined in terms of visual, as opposed to aural, or dialogic, codes. "In a culture within which the phrase 'to see' means 'to understand,'" writes Mary Ann Doane, "the epistemological powers of the subject are clearly given as a function of the centrality of the eye."<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the revelation of what actually happened in the bar on the night of the rape is rendered visually, through the technique of flashback. Yet, the flashback is associated with the court testimony of Kenneth Joyce, not with that of Sarah Tobias — Sarah's version of the events, rendered aurally as opposed to visually,



are structurally subordinate to the visible testimony of Kenneth. What makes this particularly problematic is that the truth, as equated with the visible, is enunciated by the male witness as opposed to the female victim, which serves to counter the dialogic premise of the film. The formal structure of the film, in fact, affirms the defense council's assertion that Sarah's — the victim's, the woman's — testimony is indeed "nothing."

The film's purported attack on those institutions that oppress the rape victim is also undermined by an adherence to the classic realist code of identification. Sarah Tobias is a woman who transgresses the limits of 'respectability' and 'propriety' through a desire for sexual exploration and adventure. By insidiously yet insistently providing psychological and sociological explanations for her transgressive behaviour — a poor relationship with her mother, a working-class background, financial hardships, a stressful job, an unfaithful and insensitive boyfriend — the film renders Sarah's actions more acceptable, her 'offenses' understandable and explicable, and thereby establishes her as a less problematic point of identification. Contrary to the dialogic discourse then, the inclusion of sequences involving Sarah's background and personal rela-





Before the rape: Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster) plays pinball with Danny (Woody Brown) and Bob (Steve Antin).

tionships implies that the victim's personal history is of utmost importance. The film finds it necessary to explain, rationalize and 'justify' the transgressive aspect of the character of Sarah Tobias in order to ensure the moral position of the spectator. The Accused appears to posit that such sexually transgressive behaviour should not negate the severity of the crime, yet the film's attempts to 'justify' the behaviour of Sarah Tobias implies a perceived correlation between the transgressiveness and the crime.

Says Mary Ann Doane in "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body:" "The most interesting and productive films dealing with the feminist problematic are precisely those which elaborate a new (filmic) syntax, thus 'speaking' the female body differently, even haltingly or inarticulately from the perspective of a classical syntax."<sup>9</sup> The elaboration of such an alternative syntax would disrupt the spectator, forcing the spectator to become an active producer of meaning rather than passive consumer of the dominant discourse. The graphic rape sequence in *The Accused* is an attempt to elaborate an alternative syntax, to shock the spectator out of passive complacency through a contradictory and disturbing simulation of the physical violation of a woman. The use of multiple

4. Marjorie Rosen writes in *Ms*, 17, 6 (Dec. 1988): "Although Paramount Pictures claims...that *The Accused* isn't based on any specific case, it would seem to take inspiration from some...stories of recent years: the gang rape of a young woman on the pool table of New Bedford bar in 1983; the alleged rape of a college student by several fraternity brothers at Florida State University; and the horrifying attack, this September (1988), on a Chicago woman on a train platform during rush hour..."

5. Molly Haskell, "Rape in the Movies: Update on an Ancient War," *Village Voice*, 8 October, 1979, p.45.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 45

7. According to *Variety*, 26 October, 1988, *The Accused* was the highest grossing film in the U.S. for the week ending October 19, 1988, with receipts totally \$2,167,620. It remained one of the top ten highest grossing films for the following seven weeks.

8. Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa De Laurentis & Stephen Heath, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1980, p.48.

9. Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p.226.

camera perspectives prevents an unequivocal spectatorial position, as does the creative sound-mixing of the howling, cheering, raping crowd, the muffled screaming of the victim and the haunting non-diegetic music. The graphically violent nature of the sequence, and the rendering of the agonizing duration of the crime, is both shocking and distancing — it is in no way erotic. Furthermore, the sequence demands a certain degree of active production of meaning on the part of the spectator — the line between the acquiescence and defiance of Sarah Tobias is so finely drawn that it is difficult to determine exactly when mutual flirtation becomes rape.

Yet, as an alternative syntax for the representation of sexual violence against woman, the rape sequence in *The Accused* is only partially successful. Once again, Kaplan's respect for classic realist conventions subverts the progressive intentions of the film. Adopting what Mary Ann Doane calls "the classical codification of suspense,"<sup>10</sup> Kaplan deliberately withholds the visual representation of what actually happened to Sarah Tobias such that the representation of the rape of a woman constitutes the climax of the film, the moment of satisfaction and fulfillment for the spectator. When watching the film, then, the spectator experiences both titillation and catharsis:<sup>11</sup> the titillation arising from the film's use of the codes of mystery and suspense; the moment of catharsis arising from the answering of the question 'what happened?' and the satisfying closure that establishes and maintains the notion that justice prevails. As Julia Lesage points out, such spectatorial response can only have an adverse social effect in that "titillation and catharsis...limit people's capacity for self-awareness and their impulse to effect social change."<sup>12</sup> *The Accused*, then, elicits emotional involvement rather than provoking analysis; it allows for an emotional pay-off and thus satisfaction and pleasure, engaging and constraining the spectator as "consumer, devourer of discourse."<sup>13</sup>

It is not simply its positioning within the narrative context that renders the rape sequence problematic. In her article "Lawless Seeing," an examination of pornographic representation, Annette Kuhn argues that in instances where "hostile and aggressive aspects of sexuality" are represented, "the spectator may welcome the relief from guilt offered by identification."<sup>14</sup> Throughout the rape sequence in *The Accused*, the spectator is relieved of voyeuristic complicity and guilt through the presence of the character of Kenneth Joyce. The film, from the outset, con-

structs this character as a point of identification. Kenneth Joyce is established in the opening sequence as a moral centre, as a character of action — not only is he the first character the spectator sees, but his is also the first coherent voice heard, as he calls the police outside the bar. Throughout the film, he is structurally equated with Sarah Tobias — shots of Sarah hard at work in a restaurant are intercut with shots of Kenneth hard at work in a restaurant; shots of Sarah's horrified reaction to television newscasts or her reaction to the arrest of one of the rapists after she identifies him, are intercut with shots of Kenneth's similar reactions to the same events. This parallel between the two characters culminates when they confront one another in Kathryn Murphy's office, and reveal their mutual fear and sense of vulnerability. The intense shot/reverse-shot structure here emphasizes the characters' identification with each other as well as the spectator's identification with them. This particular shot exchange seems, in



Kenneth Joyce (Bernie Coulson) is questioned by Assistant District Attorney Kathryn Murphy (Kelly McGillis).

fact, to establish Kenneth Joyce rather than Sarah Tobias as the premier point of identification — the shots of Sarah in this sequence include her and only her in the frame, whereas those of Kenneth Joyce include Sarah, partially framed from behind, in addition to Kenneth fully framed from the front. The spectator's perspective is, at this point, incorporated into that, and only that, of Kenneth Joyce: while the spectator views Kenneth literally 'over the shoulder' of Sarah, the spectator in turn views Sarah as though through the eyes of Kenneth Joyce. This particular exchange becomes a point of transformation of spectatorial identification. In the subsequent rape sequence it is the character of Kenneth that is the character of conscience, holding the correct moral position, while the character of Sarah holds the disconcerting position of sexual aggressor cum rape victim. Thus, the spectator's identification with both Sarah and Kenneth must, in preparation for the rape sequence, be transformed into a primary identification with Kenneth Joyce.

9. Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p.226.

10. Ibid., p.227.

11. Julia Lesage, "Disarming Film Rape," *Jump Cut*, 14 (December 1978), p.15.

12. Ibid.

13. Doane, "Woman's Stake," p.227.

14. Annette Kuhn, "Lawless Seeing," *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, Boston, Routledge, 1985, p.36.



The film plays on this identification during the rape sequence: shots of the horrified expressions of Kenneth are repeatedly intercut with the action of the rape; the spectator is repeatedly sutured with a desirable object of identification. Each shot of Kenneth is appropriately coded: his blond hair and the brightness of the lighting contrasts sharply with the darkness of the shots that depict the sexual violence; the shots of Kenneth are relatively long and close, in contrast with the quick editing of the sequence in general, allowing the spectator longer periods of suture and thus relief; the expression on Kenneth's face is one of moral outrage, his eyes welling up with tears. Such suturing and identification allows for, in Martin Esslin's words, the drawing of "each individual member of the audience into the action by causing (them) to identify (themselves) with the hero to the point of complete self-oblivion."<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Joyce thus becomes the agent of the spectator's own moral affirmation and emotional purgation.

Although the flashback sequence is clearly meant to be the visual manifestation of Kenneth Joyce's testimony, the sequence itself is constructed by a number of shots that are not from Kenneth Joyce's perspective, some of which are from the point-of-view of the victim herself. The assumption maintained in the flashback sequence in *The Accused* is that the image is truth, an objective truth that incorporates all perspectives, the truth provided by an omniscient camera. Yet the film strongly associates such power of omniscience with the character of Kenneth Joyce. It is his testimony that the spectator is 'seeing,' and at the beginning of the flashback sequence the film periodically returns to Kenneth Joyce on the stand in order to emphasize this association. Thus, not only is Kenneth Joyce the moral centre, he is also the purveyor of truth, the ultimate hero of the film.

Kenneth Joyce is a character that serves to absolve the spectator of any sense of complicity in the crime that is the central focus of *The Accused*. In the final shot of Kenneth Joyce, he is framed by a court-room window; the light that emanates from the window casts a halo-like gleam around his head. He becomes almost a divine character, capable of the powers of absolution. This last shot of Kenneth contributes significantly to the strong closure of the film, a closure characterized by spectatorial redemption and satisfaction. Kenneth Joyce is not, however, the only agent of spectatorial redemption, however central he may be in terms of identification during the rape sequence. The character of Kathryn Murphy also functions as a means of spectatorial redemption, and shots of her rapturous expression are intercut with the divinely lit shots of Kenneth Joyce. If Kenneth Joyce can be seen as the means through which the male spectator is brought into the narrative, then the character of Kathryn Murphy is the means through which the female is brought into the narrative. Kathryn is very much the stereotype of the 'contemporary woman': upper-middle class, career-oriented and pragmatic, somewhat insensitive. She discusses legal matters with her male colleagues at hockey games, holds refined dinner parties in her expensively decorated apartment, and emotionally dis-

tances herself from the passionate, working-class Sarah Tobias. Yet it is Sarah that raises Kathryn Murphy's feminist consciousness and challenges her privileged smugness. The 'enlightened' Kathryn becomes a strong point of identification for the female spectator because she is an important moral centre: she fights for justice despite the opposition of her male colleagues, and succeeds, and she finally bonds emotionally with Sarah Tobias after her initial rebuffs of Sarah's advances of friendship (marked by Sarah's repeated offers to "do" Kathryn's astrological chart; it is Kathryn's acceptance of Sarah's offer near the end of the film that finally seals the emotional bond between the two women). Kathryn Murphy, essentially, does the right thing without compromising her credibility as a professional. Like Kenneth Joyce, she is a more than satisfactory hero, a vehicle for spectatorial identification and absolution.

As if establishing strong points of moral identification were not enough to fix the spectator in the appropriate moral position, *The Accused* enhances the effect of identification through setting totally despicable characters in opposition to the film's points of identification. Kathryn Murphy's ethics and her desire for justice are rendered even more admirable when viewed in relation to the callousness of her colleagues, and Kenneth Joyce appears saintly compared to his college friend Bob. There are several instances in the film in which a shot-counter-shot sequence reveals Bob's almost gleeful complicity in the crime and Kenneth's disgust with it; Bob is seen leering or lecherously licking his lips, bowing to his college friends when a newscast puts him in a favourable light, or making terrible, shallow comments about his victim. The men who raped Sarah Tobias, and the men who solicited the rape, are portrayed as one-dimensional and totally execrable, particularly the 'Scorpion Man,' who is the most visible of the perpetrators. This surely must raise the question as to what exactly makes *The Accused* provocative — spectatorial outrage at what happens to Sarah Tobias seems for the most part a result of her being such an attractive, and 'acceptable' character who is raped by a group of absolutely repellent men. The film, then, offers the spectator neither the opportunity for active contemplation nor the opportunity to realize for themselves that rape and the solicitation of rape is a crime under any circumstances, regardless of the personal history of the victim or the perpetrators.

Jonathan Kaplan ends the film with some sobering statistics on the frequency of rape in the United States and the disturbingly high percentage of these rapes that involve more than one attacker. It is clear that *The Accused* is a well-intentioned film, yet one wonders why those involved insist on making it so easily digestible. Why do those involved insist on weakening the effect of a graphic depiction of rape through the over-determination of narrative conventions such as identification and suspense? And why to the frightening statistics follow an almost euphoric closure that undermines the effect of using such statistics? Perhaps *The Accused* should be commended for daring to deal with the issue of rape in a commercial context, but at the same time the film needs to be criticized for not daring to deal with the issue in a more provocative and challenging manner.

15. Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, London, Eyre and Spolti Swoode, 1959, p.109.

by Robert K. Lightning

## All About Eve, Margo, Karen...

*All About Eve* is  
often cited for its  
sophisticated  
dialogue, "... the  
highest quotient of  
verbal wit of any  
film made before  
or since" as

David Shipman  
commented in *The  
Great Movie Stars*.

Bette Davis' involvement is also often noted: the film marked her "come back" after leaving Warner Bros., her studio for nearly 20 years. Her great performance is, however, often trivialized as camp, the joint Mankewicz-Davis creation of Margo Channing viewed as a collection of exaggerated mannerisms. It has also been called "the greatest women's film of all time"<sup>1</sup> although whether this was meant as praise I don't know, the high achievements in this genre having often gone unrecognized. None of this necessarily counters Pauline Kael's estimation of the film as "ersatz art,"<sup>2</sup> but that is exactly my intention. Mankewicz's use of dialogue is far more sophisticated than has been noted and is always revelatory of character (compare, for example, Margo/Bette Davis' and Lloyd/Huge Marlowe's remarks during their theatre confrontation to determine whether the celebrated actress or the celebrated

playwright has the quickest wit). An understanding of the Davis persona is absolutely essential to a reading of the film and it is impossible to imagine its achievement without her (despite the fact that Claudette Colbert was originally slated to portray Margo). Finally if the film's source in the woman's film allows Mankewicz to explore

women's societal roles, the film's insights into gender and sexuality are finally applicable to both sexes.

I will raise briefly the subject of authorship only to say, that I am unprepared at this time to attribute the film's greatness to any specific author. Joseph L. Mankewicz's presence as guiding spirit and chief creative personage (as writer, director and essentially producer<sup>3</sup>) is undeniable. The use of flashback as well as the presentation of a person or situation from several perspectives are here structuring devices as they are in several of his films (I have at one time or another seen





*All About Eve*

most of Mankewicz's films but they were never viewed critically and only a few have been viewed recently. My references to them will therefore be somewhat limited). The central focus in his films upon women is a constant from his days at MGM as a writer/producer. That his interest in women carries certain limitations is evident from his contributions to the two films he produced at MGM for Katharine Hepburn: the prologue to *The Philadelphia Story* and the kitchen finale to *Woman of the Year*. Both scenes go quite beyond the film's apparent project of "democratizing" the Hepburn persona. Mankewicz would later part bitterly with Hepburn after filming *Suddenly Last Summer*. Viewed in this light his successful collaboration with another strong actress, Bette Davis, seems even more remarkable.

Davis' presence as star has its significance (beyond her wonderfully modulated performance, great performances by women being another Mankewicz signature). As I intend to discuss the film in relation to the woman's film, it is worth

noting that no other actress has been as unabashedly devoted to the genre as she, from tear-jerkers to murder melodramas. Perhaps the two most pronounced features of her star image are transgression against "the law of the father" and "masculinity" (both finding their ultimate expression in her use of guns in *The Letter* and *Beyond the Forest*). Her transgressions range from illegitimate birth to murder as likewise her masculinity ranges from sexual assertiveness to murder. For both these qualities she is always punished, by death if she has

1. Anonymous quote from Kenneth L. Geist's biographical filmography on Mankewicz, *Pictures Will Talk* (p.164). This is the major reference source for this article.

2. Geist, p.164, quoted from Pauline Kael's *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, Bantam Books, 1969.

3. For a hint of Mankewicz's working relationship with producer Darryl F. Zanuck see Zanuck's letter to the director on p.211 of *Pictures Will Talk*.

killed, by isolation and loneliness if her transgressions are less severe (*The Old Maid*, *Mr. Skeffington*). Here her transgression is not only pursuit of career but her decision not to marry (a decision for which she is also punished in *Now Voyager*). Margo however lives in a world (the New York theatre milieu) where these "crimes" are tolerated as are her masculine displays of sexuality. What separates *Eve* from earlier Davis films is that it is by her submitting to the ideological construct of "woman," in terms of sexuality and behaviour that she is punished. *All About Eve* stands apart in the Davis canon by the particular clarity of its criticism of the broader society that restricts women and by punishing the woman not for her transgression but for conforming.

#### GENRE

*Eve's* roots in the woman's film become obvious if we consider the film as combining two subdivisions of the genre: the "marriage vs. career" drama, centred on Margo, and the domestic drama, centred on Karen, although the latter's story is more accurately a domestic triangle (Eve's story, the film's third story line, is an inversion of the *A Star is Born* plot, Norman Maine's ultimate sacrifice for Vicky perverted into Addison de Witt's entrapment of Eve). Each is given scenes or segments devoted almost exclusively to her story set in each instance in what could reasonably be called her "domain." Margo's segments are undeniably the party (18 min. minus the Karen/Eve bedroom dialogue and the staircase scene prior to Margo's entrance) and the post audition scene (13 min). The domestic drama develops in those scenes set in the Karen/Lloyd domicile. These total roughly 8 min. if we include the rehearsal scene for Eve's play, set clearly in Eve's domain but concerned mainly with Karen's realization of the dissolution of her marriage. (Eve's story develops in those scenes she shares with Addison, in those domains that are notably only temporarily hers — the post performance dressing room and her New Haven lodgings).

The film can also be described as Eve's intervention in the lives of respectively a career woman and a home maker. One must note immediately that both women are atypical of their respective categories. Margo is more than a career woman as executive, business woman, etc. She is an actress and star and



as such is an object of admiration and envy for many (Eve for one but possibly Addison). Karen, from a privileged background herself is married to a successful playwright. She is free from financial, domestic, and perhaps most significantly, child rearing burdens (she and Lloyd are childless). Both women would seem to be comparatively free of patriarchy's day-to-day oppression. Their atypicality, however, only helps to underline the instability of their positions, as well as the strength of the ideological constraints to which Margo submits and the inequities of marital relations that are revealed to Karen.

#### MARGO AND KAREN

For both Margo and Karen (Celeste Holm) Eve's presence raises the issue of society's construction of gender, Eve's





apparent "femininity" — her politeness, her deference, her vulnerability — throwing into relief their contrasting "masculinity" — anger, rebellion, independence of thought, all those qualities society attempts to suppress to keep women "in place." Each is given a scene in which she rebels against society's constraints and the men who are its agents (however innocent they may be of their collusion). For Margo it is the party, one of the finest scenes of a woman's defiance in the Hollywood cinema. There Margo/Bette Davis puts on magnificent display all her masculine qualities. She gets drunk, fights with Bill (verbally and physically), is abusive to her guests all in spite of the protests of Bill, Lloyd and Karen. Karen for her part has a matching scene later where she a Lloyd argue over his suggestion that he give Eve the lead in his next play. He comments at one point on Karen's "bitter cynicism." She returns that it is something she acquired when

she discovered little girls are different from little boys, which surely can be read as her realization of the inequities of gender construction.

In a film centrally concerned with women Margo comes (despite the film's title) closest to being its heroine. Not only are her segments greater in length than Eve's or Karen's but they are *hers*: Karen's are as much about marriage as about her and Eve's in each case come to be dominated by Addison. Also to be considered are her individual qualities: Margo, unlike Karen, has bravely fashioned a life for herself outside of marriage and, unlike Eve (I think we can safely presume) free of duplicity. Her humanity has not, as a consequence, suffered as can be judged from her generosity to both Birdie/Thelma Ritter and Eve. So what's the matter with Margo or (in terms of the dilemma the film presents) why won't she marry Bill (Gary Merrill)? One reason (besides those explicit ones — age difference, jealousy of Eve — which have their relevance), never made explicit, is loss of autonomy and independence through marriage. She comes nearest to expressing her fear in her post-audition dialogue with Bill. After their most violent argument Bill attempts to make peace but Margo refuses saying "the terms are too high — unconditional surrender." Moments later he walks out on her after she refuses to accept his marriage proposal. Margo's dilemma is beautifully summed up here. To be a "woman" she must possess the male (possession ratified by marriage). Although Bill never indicates that he would impose on Margo's independence, traditional marriage indicates the possible rupture of her career. We can deduce that Margo herself has internalized this concept of marriage (her sensitivity to proper "feminine" behaviour not only heightened by Eve's presence but Karen's, as the model housewife). At the party a drunken Margo expresses her resentment by telling Bill, at one point, that in her house he's "not a director but a guest" and moments later sarcastically referring to Karen as the "happy little housewife." But in a later scene she also tells us that without a man "you're something with a French provincial office...or a book full of clippings." Thus she tolls an ominous knell to her career as her engagement celebration when she tells Lloyd that she "finally has a life" and there'll be "no more role playing on stage or off" (compare her exhilarated holding court with her theatre "family" in the film's first flashback). Finally during the awards ceremony, we see a bitter Margo presumably now married (she wears a ring) seated among the audience as opposed to those we know to be still active in the theatre, seated at the honoree's table.

Related to the ideological construction of the "feminine" woman (one might say lurking beneath it) is the taboo on lesbianism, homosexuality posing a far more fundamental threat to patriarchy than a career. And logically if Margo cannot accept her identity as a woman independent of men, then we should not expect her to accept her potential for lesbian desire. What I have in mind is discussion of Margo's "dilemma" in terms of Freud's theories on paranoia following Robin Wood's analysis of *Raging Bull* in his *Hollywood from Vietnam*

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to Reagan. According to Freud's theories, the paranoid symptoms (as with Scorsese's *La Motta*) result from the repression of an unwanted homosexual desire. For a more detailed exposition of Freud's theories I would refer readers to the above mentioned essay or to Wood's more recent *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* and particularly Chapter 16 ("The Murderous Gays") and its description of constitutional bisexuality, homophobia and society's construction of masculinity/femininity. For my purposes I will simply relate that the paranoid symptoms can be read as denials of the basic proposition "I love a member of my own sex." For Margo (as for Jake La Motta) this takes the principle form of delusions of jealousy or "I don't love Eve, Bill loves Eve" (without overestimating his skill at psychoanalysis it is worth noting that the term "paranoid" is at least twice applied to Margo by Bill himself, which would seem to confirm Mankiewicz's knowledge of these theories). I will extract three segments to highlight the development of symptoms.

■ — THE INTRODUCTION. Even before their introduction Margo is aware of Eve's presence and has distinguished her from her other fans as "the mousy one" (in contrast to Margo

who later describes herself as a rat). That Eve Harrington's contrasting qualities are already perceived as a threat is suggested by Margo's comically regal introduction and her deliberate misremembering Eve's name ("Miss Worthington"). After Eve has won her over with the story of her sad early life (which shrewdly contains elements onto which both Margo and Karen can fix) but also her unabashed idolatry, Margo emerges from her bathroom in very feminine attire (make-up, shoulder length hair, form fitting suit) making a careless (exaggerated?) display of her legs, as she bends to retrieve her coat commenting (of Bill) "He can't take his eyes off my legs." This "demonstration" for Eve, still a stranger, can be read as the paranoid denial "I don't love women — I love men (and they love me)."

2. THE PHONE CALL. Eve moves into Margo's home and establishes herself as Margo's servant/companion, the servile nature of her duties allowing for the convenient disavowal of any sexual undertones that might attach to the relationship. One night Margo is awakened by the long distance operator with a surprise call place earlier by Eve in Margo's name to Bill on his birthday (which Margo had forgotten). Her "suspicions" are aroused when Bill reveals that Eve has been corresponding with him (he is in Hollywood). Phone call and letters are Eve's obvious attempts to usurp Margo's place with Bill. But Bill does not know of Eve's involvement in the call and (as he freely tells Margo) he had assumed that she dictated Eve's letters. Her reaction is more logically the first manifestation of her paranoid jealousy: Eve's qualities of devotion and self-effacement (which the phone call and letters can be felt to signal), to which Margo fears Bill will be attracted are actually the ones to which *she* is attracted.

3. THE PARTY. While drunk, Margo's paranoia is given full vent, denunciations of Eve (corresponding to the paranoid denial "I don't love her — I hate her") are juxtaposed with vague assertions of Eve's threat (the delusions of persecution that are necessary to justify the hatred). That Eve eventually does make a play for Bill would seem to confirm the rationality of the threat. But it is Margo's accusations of Bill (whom the audience never doubts) that confirm her paranoia. Margo's underlying sexual fear is almost made explicit as she departs for bed, telling Bill that Eve would be more than willing to "tuck me in." To Eve's willing "If you'd like" Margo responds definitively "I wouldn't like." If Margo is potentially a tragic heroine, (and with each viewing I become more convinced that she is) her capitulation to ideology's gender and sexual restraints (under of course of overwhelming weight of American patriarchy circa 1950) is her tragic flaw.

Once the pattern is established of Eve's upsetting the security of two women, Karen's story is related in short order. Once again the rupture is centred on the issues of femininity, gender and sexuality. Having devoted herself totally to Lloyd's career through the sanctioned institution of marriage, Karen now reaps the dubious reward of having him turn to a younger, more vulnerable (more feminine?), more *interesting* woman. Karen herself tells us that she has no "talent" to offer short of "loving your husband." It is natural to associate this lack with career, the one thing Karen doesn't have, the very thing in fact that Margo ruptures to become "a married lady." A woman's dilemma could hardly be summed up better.



## EVE AND ADDISON: THE OUTSIDERS

The film's most obvious lesbian signifiers attach to Eve/Ann Baxter (Eve in masculine attire with Margo in fur coat, Eve and female companion in bathrobes walking arm in arm, etc.). That she *might* be certainly adds to her "outsider" status. But even disregarding her "lesbianism" Eve is a sexual outsider as her aggressiveness with Bill tells us (compare Margo's sexual meekness with Bill). Her outsider status (in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, possible sexual orientation) certainly allows us to *understand* her ambition and even her duplicity but any attempt to make her the film's heroine is undermined by Margo who unlike Eve or Karen earns not only our understanding and sympathy but our admiration. Similarly, any attempts to read her as merely "evil" are undermined by the fact that her actions express the ambivalent feelings the other women have for one another. Eve's evident contempt for Karen's patrician qualities are reflected in Margo's comments during the party (she tells Karen at one point, contemptuously "Don't play governess"). As for Karen her whole involvement with Eve suggests an attempt to unseat Margo, from her introduction of Eve (to prove to Margo that there are those who are less fortunate than she), to her plot to get Eve on stage, to her enigmatic smile as Eve accepts her award.

Eve becomes most sympathetic when she herself is victimized by Addison/George Sanders. It is through Sanders (whose image as developed in *Rebecca*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as here, suggests a contempt for heterosexual "normality") that the film extends its explorations into gender and sexuality to include men. Two essential points about Addison must be noted:

1. His ambiguous position within "the theatre" as expressed by his simultaneous admiration for/resentment of theatre folk.
2. His identification with women and his resulting insecurity about his manhood.

His identification with women is given to us during the opening awards ceremony where caustic comments aimed at the aged actor/presenter are followed by (more or less) admiring references to actresses of the past. A later list of theatre greats (to which he adds Eve) is also female (the list includes Margo). The linkage of this to his ambiguous theatre position is revealed in the party's excellent staircase scene. There, contrasting relationships to "the theatre" are juxtaposed and similarities between characters are revealed (including an enigmatic one between Bill and Miss Caswell/Marilyn Monroe). Although he does not "toil" in the theatre, Addison here aligns himself as part of "we theatre folk" under the shared characteristic of "abnormality." Bill (the heterosexual male par excellence) quickly counters (to Addison's annoyance) that the theatre also requires hard work, dedicated, talent, etc., the lack of which, we can deduce, have kept Addison from becoming an actual creative force *within* the theatre. We can further deduce that he wants desperately to belong ("We theatre folk" and resents his exclusion (his column is known for its caustic commentary). His actor-protégés place him "in" the theatre and the fact that they are all women underlines the female identification. But patriarchy teaches men that "femi-

ninity" is inferior to those qualities labeled "masculine" and must be disowned (a process that is essence destroys his ability to identify with women). Addison's continuing identification with women threatens his security and must be denied as in a parallel process Margo denies her masculinity/lesbianism. Thus the need to dominate his protégés sexually (and thus the link between Miss Caswell, who flatters Addison's manhood, and Bill whose brand of masculinity flatters Margo's sense of herself as feminine). In Eve's New Haven apartment, Addison's sudden revulsion ("What do you take me for?") is not because she has presumed herself as an equal but because she has (in sharing confidences) treated him like another woman, one of the girls. His denial takes the properly "medieval" form of making her his sex slave. His conflicting impulses are revealed moments later in the bedroom as he alternates between asserting his "masculinity" (associated at one point with traditional American values when he denounces Eve for her "insult" to dead service men) and admiration for Eve's audacity (chastising her for a lie that was "unworthy" of her). Perhaps Addison gives us a hint of the quality of their subsequent relationship when he describes her opening night as "a night to remember" and tells us that she "gave the performance of a lifetime." As it is also the night that he takes possession of her he is not necessarily describing her theatre performance.

The ending of Eve (from the return to the awards banquet to the final scene in Eve's apartment) conveys an overwhelming sense of loss and emptiness that contradicts completely the description "ersatz art." The emptiness can be explained in terms of Eve's truly empty triumph, all she has destroyed in her pursuit of autonomy only to be entrapped by another of patriarchy's sexual/gender victims. The sense of loss is centred on the rupture of Margo's career and Karen's marriage. The film hints that perhaps not even the friendships have survived for though seated at the same table to two women are never seen speaking and Margo brushes past Lloyd without speaking on her way to congratulate Bill. But the final focus is on *all* women as the multi-reflected image of the girl Phoebe clearly tells us. If there are hundreds of other "Eves" they are also all victimized by patriarchy (Phoebe is obviously next in line to be ensnared by Addison), their desire for autonomy and expression corrupted by society's class, gender and sexual inequities. Our sense of futility is countered, I think, by only one character, Margo, whom I have described as *potentially* tragic. As I have noted Margo is seated among the audience during the awards banquet signalling her current exclusion from "the theatre." Whether her career is over we are never told but she is now seated with those who are not creatively involved in the theatre, each of whom is introduced by a camera pan from the previously introduced person (Max from Karen from Addison) thus connecting them as seated at the same table but also as non-creative. Margo/Davis is introduced last and by a *cut* (as befits also Davis' star status) thus separating her from the other three (until recently I thought she was seated at a separate table but the film's opening track across the dining room reveals she is seated with the others). The ambiguity supplied by the editing suggests simultaneously the possible loss of her career but also her potential return to creativity.

What follows is a revised version of a paper I gave at the 1991 Film Studies Association Conference in May at Queen's University. I was motivated to deliver the paper by the profound dissatisfaction and frustration I have felt teaching a "Women and Film" course at Concordia University for the last two years. In so doing, I hoped to initiate discussion and foreground the risks to the feminist movement of appropriation and stagnation resulting from the token introduction of some feminisms within the hallowed walls of our universities. Granted, some departments at some institutions have accepted the feminist challenge more enthusiastically than others. My own experience, however, as both student and instructor at several universities in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal over the last decade have served to remind me how much still needs to be done if we are ever to transform public education in Canada.<sup>1</sup>



## Women and Film

TEACHING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

by Marilyn Burgess

The course I teach, which was designed many years before I 'inherited' it, aims to expose middle year film studies students to the broadest range of women film directors in one thirteen week session. The experienced feminist instructor will smile to herself and wonder what kind of "overview" of feminist approaches to film is possible under these circumstances. For those who do not immediately appreciate what a thankless project this is, I hope that reading to the end of this article will enlighten them.

1. When I first began looking for work in Montreal, I was told by three different departments at Concordia University alone that they already had a 'woman's course' and consequently I should either apply elsewhere or design a different type of course.



The material in feminist film courses is difficult because thirteen or (if lucky) twenty-six weeks are all one has to condense years of feminist inquiry and practice. The sheer numbers of books and articles published in the last ten years by feminist theorists in the field of film criticism alone, as well as the growing numbers of films made by feminists, attest to the speed at which this "sub-discipline" has grown.<sup>2</sup> If successful, the course will engage students in a different epistemology, a 'perceptual shift' requiring a lot of effort for some. In the worst cases, this will happen without benefit of any substantial re-inforcement or complementarity in other courses, except where students are enrolled in regular women's studies programs. (Remember that outside of them, the rule is one, at best two feminist courses per department.) I suspect that this marginal status for feminist courses, while it may be the result of hostility on the part of curriculum committee members, is most probably due to a lack of understanding of the terms of feminist inquiry and its consequent demands for fundamental transformations in existing pedagogical agendas. For this reason, I have decided to describe here how a feminist film course might be structured.

Feminism demands precisely that the terms of totalizing discourses which exclude and silence women as the repressed term of the former's unity, be interrogated and changed. This is a demand for both epistemological and methodological revisions to existing teaching practices: to critique existing approaches to film studies, to uncover the discursive practices of exclusion within films, and to suggest new approaches to representation based on political awareness and critique.

#### LIMITING THE FIELD

At the very outset, the ironic course title "Women and Film" suppresses the terms of feminist inquiry which are feminist filmmaking and feminist film theory, by suggesting, as all "Women and ..." formulations, that women are extraneous to a previously delimited field, a sort of afterthought, hastily added to the terms of an otherwise complete and unitary object, in this case film studies. For so long in fact did this attitude in film studies prevail, that it became as comfortably familiar as if it were correct. The questions posed by films and film theory alike seemed to be the obvious ones and the field was abuzz with creative research. Things continued in this way for a very long time, even though in the 1960s women started to meet and raise their consciousness. And even though, sometime in the late 1960s and early 1970s these women with raised consciousness started to ask questions about the questions that were being asked in film studies, as in every other academic discipline.

The unity of film studies as a discourse has been purchased at the expense of being able to recognize its own complicity in the construction of sexual and racial difference; and the most significant challenge to this apparently stable and unified field has been posed by feminism. The traditional scene of film studies promotes the 'view' (!) of women and non-white men as peripheral to the main action (in all aspects of film production), by privileging meaning for them in film interpretation. Conversely, feminism recognizes the very important role the representation of sexual and racial alterity

plays in the constitution of hegemonic (white) masculine subjectivities, in film and in talk about film. Creating courses which look at 'Woman and Film' recuperates the challenge posed by feminism by re-inscribing sexual alterity into a dominant epistemology, as opposed to the more radical move of changing the terms of its own sexist discourse.

In this way, gender constructs are left intact. But Teresa de Laurentis has argued that gender cannot be assumed to derive unproblematically from sexual differences located in bodies because it is not a property of bodies (Teresa de Laurentis, 1987). It is the "set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations" by the deployment of "a complex political technology," (Michel Foucault, cited in Teresa de Laurentis, 1987:3). Gender exists *before* sexual difference as a category into which we are placed. As de Laurentis argued in *Technologies of Gender*, the gender system is reproduced by academic discourses, feminist or otherwise, which do not interrogate its *production*, but rather assume it as a virtually unmediated "fact" of bodily difference. "Women and ..." formulations leave the female category of the gender system (and by implication, its male counterpoint) unproblematic. By its inattention to the production of one of the terms of the gender system, this type of generic title imbues a false universality to the socially and historically contingent meanings which are assigned to gendered categories of human beings.

Some of my students come to my classes believing fully in the peripheral role women occupy in filmmaking and film criticism. They are not interested in the various feminist approaches to film decoding which theorize how film discourses work to occlude non-male, non-white subjectivities. They have come for the "Women and ..." approach. I want to give two examples, both of which made me realize how futile it is to raise consciousness alone, in a token course, without the support of all the resources the university has at its disposal. One of my students proposed a paper about women and film scores, preferring to conduct her research by the usual methods used to examine women in the industry — a sort of 'great women' version of the 'great men' variety of scholarship. At best, this request represents a search for role models of one's own sex, and identification with "strong" or successful women. At worst, it assumes that gender categorizing follows a natural order, and offers no hope for social change short of the individual pursuit of "excellence." This again leaves the social mechanisms of oppression and privilege, those which traverse and deflect gender, unquestioned.

A more disturbing example is the paper proposed by a student who wanted to write about the set design in Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête* (*Scream from Silence*). This student was motivated by some misguided notion of the "proper way" to approach films; in this case privileging aesthetic and formal concerns *at the expense* of content. This request was particularly disturbing to me given that for the film in question, I had talked at great length of the intimate relationship between Poirier's aesthetic strategy and her political objective

2. As will become evident later in this article, it is my contention that feminist film production and theory deserve to be considered as a discipline in their own right.



*The Gold Diggers*, Sally Potter 1984



*Mourir à Tue-Tête*



of consciousness raising — interrogating and demystifying the phenomenon of rape. But if we believe, as this student did, that the field of film studies was adequately mapped out before the advent of feminism, then why not approach *Mourir à tue-tête* as a careful collage of myriad aesthetic decisions — a masterpiece of Brechtian cinema produced right here at home? Why indeed discuss rape, and what it means for us as women, and for our society as a whole, or indeed what qualifies as rape? (Remember that Molly Haskell went so far as to theorize rape within the very institution of cinema.) If the field of film research is exhausted without feminist concerns, then why indeed discuss the very tangible role this film has played for consciousness raising in Quebec and elsewhere?

### CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

What is at stake in a feminist course is the possibility of teaching students how to make sense of some of their everyday experiences of gender; teaching them to think critically, by becoming conscious of their status in the world as members

as gender female. Thus, to feminism, the personal is epistemologically the political, and its epistemology is its politics (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup>

Whether it be Betty Friedan's 'problem that has no name,' the regulation of sexuality in birth control, abortion, compulsory heterosexuality and rape; or 'difference' and the various technologies which en-gender us in difference; the practice of CR, in its evolving sophistication, has allowed us to identify these problems as problems and to act on them. (Indeed, one can hardly talk about the importance of the 'personal testimony' variety of feminist documentaries without reference to the 'epistemic privilege' of lived experience in feminist theory, even when we are aware of the ways in which all knowledge is discursively constructed.)

Teaching feminist film courses today without integrating discourse theory is untenable. But before I even begin to outline in my classes what discourse is, how it positions subjectivities, and how these are articulated in collective notions of identity, I have to begin by locating the student: to make her or him aware of her own, or his own, location with respect to privilege, to oppression and the grand negatives of "biological" gender and racial difference. If the student can grasp these ideas, then she or he is in a position to understand some of the various theoretical accounts of how films articulate, mimic or ironize these mechanisms of subjectivity. This is what I mean by raising consciousness: raising the problems articulated by feminism which can then be discussed with respect to the ways in which they have been taken up in film production and film studies.

### FEMINIST APPROACHES TO FILM

Feminist filmmakers are informed by developments in feminist politics and theory. Their films are pointed interventions into public discourses, feminist and hegemonic, and need to be addressed within this context.<sup>4</sup> Let me suggest then a different set of courses under the rubric of "Feminist Approaches to Film." Typically, introductory courses would provide some feminist theories as contexts for discussing relevant feminist and non-feminist films, while advanced courses would focus more narrowly on key theoretical and practical reasons. Consider this: Sally Potter's film *The Gold Diggers* is a classic, if such a word can be used, of contemporary feminist cinema. I always save it for the end of my course because of its complexity. I want to give students the best chance at understanding its problematic. This means that I must introduce them to socialist feminist accounts of women's domestic labour and labour in the market economy, psychoanalytic feminist accounts of the place of woman's image in visual economies of 'male pleasure,' as well as provide them with an introduction to performance art. Presumably, this won't be the first experimental film they see, so that aspect of the film should be somewhat familiar. If I show a different film each week, and each sufficiently different from the others as to provide an overview of "women and film," how can I possi-

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of gendered categories of human beings. In a film course, the object is to teach how film reproduces those categories of gender, and how students (as all of us) are as implicated in this process, and finally to theorize some of the consequences. Teaching feminist courses is not a job for disinterested academics. It is part of the spectrum of feminist strategies we are applying to the transformation of society. As such, my first priority as a feminist instructor, regardless of the department I find myself in, or the title of the course I am teaching, is to raise consciousness. To make my students, both women and men, aware of the social and discursive practices, including representational practices, which have shaped their lives and which are in a large sense determining the futures they can hope for.

Raising or changing consciousness in 'gendered' individuals constitutes the first step toward social transformation. The fundamental relationship between feminist consciousness and feminist political practice was explained by Teresa de Lauretis as a 'disposition to action' in her essay "Semiotics and Experience," (de Lauretis, 1984). For that argument, she was inspired by Catherine McKinnon's 1982 article entitled "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State." The following is a key passage from that text:

To say that the personal is political means that gender as a division of power is discoverable and verifiable through women's intimate experience of sexual objectification, which is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives



bly do justice to this film or its audience of largely inexperienced students? Even my best students have difficulty with it. This film, and many other feminist 'classics' deserve to be treated in depth. Nor should they be reserved for a token advanced seminar in 'Women and Film,' should the department have one. There are simply too many to be sufficiently represented there either.

The problematic of outlining the different feminist film practices and theories might first appear to lend itself to a historical approach. One beginning perhaps with the silent films of Nell Shipman, Alice Guy or Germaine Dulac and culminating in the Hollywood of the last decade with the work of Donna Deitch and Susan Seidelman. But this leaves the category of 'women' unproblematicized with respect to the myriad differences within women. In other words, this approach does not investigate the construction of gender, it leaves the terms of the "Woman and ..." fallacy intact. The category of 'women' is not universal. How we come to know ourselves as women is effected by our experiences of, for example, homophobic, racist and class exclusions. Like the cinematic apparatus, technologies of gender are broader than single texts and films which constitute but single elements of larger discursive currents through which we are en-gendered in everyday life. Changing or raising consciousness necessitates the discourses of ethnography, colonialism and racism; psychoanalysis and patriarchy; or science and Empiricism; for the ways in which they come together to position women in difference (in different relations to the archetypal Woman).

Rather than proposing a chronology of women directors, "Feminist Approaches to Film" would be better served by an intertextual methodology, organized around the problematics of: 1) interrogating the differences among women expressed in hierarchies of privilege and power, and 2) interrogating how those differences are constructed in representation. For example, I like to teach Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Naked Spaces Living is Round* in conjunction with Arlene Bowman's *Navajo Talking Pictures* or Tracey Moffat's *Nice Coloured Girls*, discussing them in relation to the literature of the colonialism and ethnographic representation. I may use for this the text of Trinh T. Minh-ha herself, or those of Mary Louise Pratt, James Clifford or even Edward Said. And I don't teach this topic in isolation. I may relate it to Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien's *The Passion of Remembrance*, because it is about reclaiming those discourses, and understanding the historical contingencies of any racial stereotyping. While this strategy allows me to position the films in relation to the broader discourses generated by European imperialism it still privileges the analysis of single (film) texts. If "Feminist Approaches to Film" were given the space to breathe and grow, then eventually feminist instructors, along with their students, could afford the time to re-think the role of cinema in larger discursive environments. Giuliana Bruno has produced a marvellous example of this in her forthcoming book 'about' Elvira Notari, a prolific silent film director in Italy, with 60 features and over 100 documentaries to her credit between 1906 and 1930.

In a paper presented at York University last fall called "Streetwalking: A Woman's Cinema and the Urban Landscape," Bruno looked at the sites of spectatorship for Notari's films in the Naples Arcade and Galeria, the Naples

train station and in the street.<sup>5</sup> In each place, she examines the possibilities for women's transgressive pleasure, a pleasure not accounted for by the usual structural or psychoanalytic accounts of narrative pleasure. Contrary to the privileged and intimate relationship postulated between film and spectator in the theories of Metz, Mulvey, et. al., Bruno interrogates the nomadic, collective experience of reception in the Arcade, on the trains, and in the street, and maps women's traditional relationship to these public sites in order to theorize/invent the notion of transitive desire. In this sense a book 'about' Elvira Notari is somewhat of a pretext for investigating the public circulation of film and the problematic of spectatorship.

On the other hand, Meaghan Morris, in a paper presented at McGill University last winter, has mapped the iconic figure of King Kong into tales of gentrification and the resulting increase in homelessness in Sydney during the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Here, the feminist problematics of gender, home and representation were woven together around the advertising image of the hapless ape atop a tower slated for development. While the specifics of that paper are beyond the scope of this article, Morris' approach is nevertheless of interest. Integrating in her analysis of gentrification the ways in which cinema produces icons, images, and personas which then circulate in popular culture with some rather surprising consequences, Morris provides a fine example of how a "Feminist Approaches to Film" course could be successfully taught.

## CONCLUSION

The field of feminist film production, criticism and theory grows in diversity, complexity and numbers each year. It is perhaps the most challenging and fastest growing area within the field of film studies. However, the commitment to examining or promoting these developments in the classrooms of our universities lags far behind. The result is often burn-out for the few of us entrusted with so daunting a task. We are thirty years into the modern incarnation of the feminist movement, and feminist film courses continue to be given so little time, when there is so much that must be covered.

3. Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," reprinted in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (eds.), University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1983, p.247.

4. Another important contextualizing aspect of feminist film is that a good deal of it is feminist video! While video may be the poor cousin to mainstream or high 'art' canons, it is for women without benefit of adequate funds or for women with specific strategic needs, their preferred means of expression. These works should be integrated into feminist film courses, especially here in Canada where video is a developed practice recognized by committed critical writers.

5. "Feminisms in the Cinema," an international conference held at York University, November 1990. Organized by Laura Pietropaolo and Ada Testaferri of the department of Languages and Linguistics.

6. "Life as a Tourist Object," paper presented by Meaghan Morris at McGill University, March 1991. Sponsored by the Comparative Literature Dept.



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The precarious  
dilemma inherent  
in a politics of

# FEMINIST

Film  
Theory  
Criticism

identity caught between discourses of  
authenticity and the 'technologies of self',  
is the (contradictory) cornerstone of the  
feminist movement, at once united and  
fragmented by difference.

